

Son

of the

Native

Soil

Shadrach A. Ambanasom

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Dedication

To the loving memory of Bernard Ambanasom, a son
whose precocious love for the soil inspired the father.

Preface to the Third Edition

The author of a novel published less than a decade ago owes the reading public a little explanation when the text is already running into its third edition. First published by Patron Publishing House, Bamenda, in 1999, *Son of the Native Soil* was published in its revised form in 2006 by Unique Printers, Bamenda. Some may well wonder what event of ‘earthquake’ proportion could have warranted another edition so soon in 2007. The reason is simple.

When in 2006 the Cameroon G.C.E Board chose *Son of the Native Soil* as the new African literature text for the Ordinary Level Examination, some ill-intentioned and grubby Cameroonians thought an opportunity had come for them to make easy money. They began to reap where they had not sown. Before I had even received my own official consignment of the books, illegal copies of the revised edition were already in circulation in the country, and selling below the market price, inflicting on me untold psychological pain and causing me a great deal of material and financial losses as I struggled, through cumbersome litigation and the narration of the law, to combat the illegal sale of my book.

The third edition is thus motivated by my desire to protect the quality of the consumers’ product and to make its price more affordable than before. I have also availed myself of the opportunity of a third edition to expunge from the text some detectable blemishes. But, above all, the third edition has been prompted by the wish to provide the text with a good and much-needed introduction, generously furnished here by Edward A. Ayugho, the current President of ELTS North West and Vice-President of CAMELTA. This third edition can therefore enjoy the status of the authoritative, definitive version of the text.

Shadrach A. Ambanasom
Bambili – Bamenda, Cameroon

Introduction

Edward A. Ayugh

Recent creative trends in Cameroon have witnessed an upsurge in literary activity as more and more works of art continue to enrich, especially, the Anglophone literary scene. The novel is taking centre stage, and Shadrach A. Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil*, is undeniably a remarkable achievement in this direction. It is worth recalling here that the first wave of African novels attracted a lot of Western charges which somewhat caused the enthusiasm in the art of writing novels to wane. Eurocentric criticism saw these novels as deficient in plot and psychological exploration of character, and as mere cultural or socio-anthropological documentation full of high local colour and political didacticism. We want to note that this was a misguided judgement because these critics ignored the fact that the African experience, which informs African novels, is different from the European in every sense of the word. Eurocentric critics also failed to recognize that African novels are a hybrid: a mulatto of African oral literature and imported Western forms. Therefore, to have attempted to tie African works to Western values which impose their own demands and not African concerns, these critics were simply involved in an activity which could best be seen as an effort to protect Western standards and tastes. However, many African writers have benefited, to some extent, from this criticism, and improved on their art. It is within this framework that this introduction to Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil* has been constructed.

The Ngie (Dudum) society, which informs the novel, is a microcosm of the modern day African society. Ambanasom places the reader at a vantage point from where he/she appreciates contemporary society in which unity is as scarce as desert vegetation. The work is an insightful, strong-minded portrayal of the Dudum predicament with whose moral options, Ambanasom has come to

grips and documented with religious exactitude. Historical and cultural clues, names of real persons and places, political wrangling and disunity which retard development, lend to the text a general Ngie (Dudum) consciousness from which Ambanasom thus draws inspiration for his novel.

Son of the Native Soil is the profoundly crafted account of Lucas A. Achamba who sets out to unite his Dudum people who have over the years been split into Lower and Upper Dudum, fuelled by ill-advised village loyalty, regional solidarity and political rivalry. Anjong village that enjoys the support of the much larger Upper Dudum and Akan village of Lower Dudum tussle for leadership in the Dudum clan which comprises nineteen villages. In spite of the geographical reality that Anjong village is at the middle point of the clan, and the historical fact which Achamba (himself from Akan) digs up from the national archives to support Anjong's case, Akan, led by Abaago would not see reason. Achamba initiates a move towards unity, a rapprochement of the hitherto split Dudum elite, and this results in the birth of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association. By acclamation he becomes the pioneer president and is designated as the lone candidate to run in Dudum for upcoming national political elections. Henceforth, Achamba enjoys political and social prominence beyond measure. This blights Abaago's hopes, wounds his pride, roughens their relationship and he nurses lethal hatred for Achamba.

Things are made worse by some other complicated problems and tough choices that Achamba has to make, choices which Abaago exploits to paint Achamba black and make him appear more as a threat than an asset to Akan village. However, the mild-mannered and much-admired Achamba keeps his calm. Eventually Achamba is quietly and mysteriously eliminated. His death shocks the entire Dudum clan and dashes its hopes. Three months following his death, his wife Echunjei gives birth to a baby boy. The child is christened Uyaka Achamba. Six years later, the mystery surrounding Achamba's death is unravelled and Abaago is at the centre of the senseless killing. Infuriated, the youth gear up to roast Abaago alive. Before this happens, Abaago takes away his own life through suicide.

Notice that there is the sub-plot which centres on the love affair between Achamba and Echunjei. Ambanasom neatly weaves it into the main plot with disarming artistic maturity. In no small way does

the love story foster the main plot. The beginning of their courtship already hints at the author's visionary proposition: Achamba will eventually marry Echunjei and this would be the unity of Akan and Anjong – the antagonistic forces, to accelerate development in Dudum.

Ambanasom peoples his text with two categories of characters – the progressive (Achamba, Akaya, Echunjei, Embuta etc), and the conservative (Abaago, Ubeno, Umeitoh, etc). Achamba is the main character. He is proactive and radiates a charm which soon endears him to Dudum people. An English Language and Literature teacher, he keeps a cordial relationship with other people, rejects in all its forms what he considers wrong, and hopes to unite his people in the interest of progress. A well-educated member of the Dudum elite, he articulates the cause for unity and its all-too-important bearing on Dudum with regard to growth. But would this be an achievable agenda? Achamba is the author's expression of the new wisdom which Dudum badly needs to forge ahead. In other words, he is chiselled out as an approximation of Ambanasom's vision for the prosperity of Dudum. In his crusade Achamba who hails from Akan would rather justifiably rally all active forces in Dudum to militate for Anjong to lead. He embraces this as a commitment in which he must place communal interest above the individual's. He becomes repulsive, even anathema, to the antiquated Abaago who, blinded by close-mindedness and nepotism, hates anything which does not suggest exclusive Akan advancement, and so sees Achamba as a traitor. Achamba knows that to develop Akan will be counterproductive even if convenient. He thus personally inclines towards the entire Dudum cause. This is, of course, an enlightened choice. Regrettably Abaago, who has been rendered insignificant by Achamba's folksy and selfless nature, would go beyond the bounds of decency to exterminate him. With regard to the entire Dudum clan, Achamba's death becomes a metaphor for self-immolation.

His death would seem not an accidental occurrence, as Ambanasom has sufficiently prepared the reader to see character motivation and guess their outcomes: Achamba opts for a united Dudum led by Anjong; Abaago faults him and avails himself of every given occasion to express his aversion for Achamba; the youth

reject his call to rise against Achamba, and this leaves a bitter taste in Abaago's mouth, propelling him to seek another alternative to settle scores with his foe. Embuta constantly warns his son against the likes of Abaago and even cautions him against making frequent trips to Dudum. With all of this Ambanasom subtly goads the reader to smell the fate which awaits his admirable hero. In relating the events which precede Achamba's death and the general atmosphere which animates his funeral rites, the author demonstrates a refined artistic power to rouse feeling and emotional realism. When Achamba dies, the youth, through the students' leader, rationalise the situation and align with Achamba's ideas and promise to pursue his ideals. With this pledge of loyalty couched in undisguised emotional devastation and sympathy, Achamba emerges as a tragic hero with catholic proportions. The youth's vow is that which seems to impose an inevitable well-founded way forward after the apparent Dudum self-destruction emblemized by Achamba's death. Achamba's demise amounts to the expression of the point of view that nothing is too great to be sacrificed for a well-intentioned revolution. Achamba's death symbolises his dedication to the Dudum cause, and he takes his seat in the conclave of martyrs.

A new dawn is thus marked for Dudum, amplified by the birth of Uyaka Achamba, (a son to the deceased Achamba) in whose veins flows the blood of Akan (Achamba) and that of Anjong (Echunjei). This skilful and symbolic blend of the opposing forces in Dudum to produce Achamba's eminent heir would seem to be the strongest point in Ambanasom's moral vision.

When Abaago is incriminated in revelations made six years later about Achamba's death, the reader's worst fears are confirmed. Recall that as an Akan frontline politician, Abaago does nothing during Achamba's funeral worthy of the narrator's mention. To have kept a low profile in addition to his perennially strained relationship with Achamba, Abaago had given the reader reason to suspect that he might be up to something evil with regard to Achamba's undoing. His implication in the misdeed causes the author's anger, like the reader's, to know no restraint until pacified when evil feeds on itself – Abaago scuttles off into suicide. Ambanasom seems to find the old school of Dudum leaders too ready to compromise, for personal aggrandisement, anything that would jostle Dudum to move forward.

This is the reason why the youth are ready to turn the scale now against sentimental paternalism. Abaago's death is thus a fitting curtain that draws to a close an era of bigotry and narrow-mindedness. It is, by extension, the author's critique of sectionalist prejudices in Dudum.

Like Achamba and Abaago, Ambanasom's other characters are convincing. Which of them would a reader forget? The level-headed and pacific Akaya, the diminutive and indecisive Umeitoh from whom the depraved Abaago hides the extent and true nature of his proclivity for evil, Echunjei who beams with both a physical and moral beauty, Rex Mokoli the brazenly corrupt administrator, Neba who tickles Achamba to the role of the educated elite in the development of his place, Embuta the caring and foresighted father, the time-honoured, incorruptible allegorical Squirrel Judge? None of Ambanasom's major characters can easily be dismissed as a hastily created bubble which soon bursts and disappears from the reader's sight and mind. Notice the striking juxtaposition of Abaago and Ubeno, and Abaago and Achamba. We also find in Akaya a refreshing foil for Umeitoh. These and the other characters leave an indelible impression on the reader because they are psychologically motivated and fashioned out within the context of verisimilitude.

In *Son of the Native Soil*, Ambanasom offers a myriad of perspectives which hinge on classical issues or matters of universal resonance such as man's inhumanity to man, living in fame by dying for virtue's cause or martyrdom, retributive justice or nemesis, individual versus collective will. The author also advocates peaceful conflict resolution as we witness in Akaya's peace emissaries to Umeitoh, following the attack and seizure of Anjong women's farm tools at the Ukob farmland by Akan youth. Peaceful conflict resolution, as we know, occupies centre stage in contemporary thought, diplomacy and ethos. Parental pre-arranged marriages also feature prominently in the text, lived through Echunjei's betrothal to Eziaga.

Given that this introduction is written with both the general and student readership in view, we want to add here other thematic considerations: the squirrel as an instrument of social control, unending animosity, estrangement and incomprehensible cruelty among Dudum people, traced back to early contact with colonial

rule (German and British) and multiparty politics (KPP and CUP), state or administration as obstacle to Dudum modernisation, hospitality and other social mores, Achamba's death as disaster with cosmic proportions for Dudum, Ukob: the essence of land ownership to man, culture, petty jealousies, and evil-engendering village loyalties. These issues would surely stimulate critical and classroom discussions and offer a plethora of moral insights. Thematic variation has the tendency to grip and sustain the reader's interest.

Arguably the allegory of the squirrel judge is electrifying. The reader would relate with it and share an intimacy with the African atmosphere and mind which are also heightened in the text through local idiom, scenery, the supernatural, soothsaying, among others. Ambanasom uses evocative imagery, hard to escape the reader's notice. He employs stylistic elements such as symbolism, allusions, contrast, incantation, onomatopoeia and songs. His language is seasoned with pidgin, French, local patterns, proverbs, wise sayings, historical and cultural anecdotes which blend fact and fiction, and transliteration which renders Ngie authentic thought pattern in English. Equally impressive and innovative is Ambanasom's use of poetry which defines character and says something about the object it addresses. Most of these features function to reveal so much about the Dudum value system. Ngie (Dudum) words like "ibet", "atupid", "ndek", "ubu", "abu", "amumba", "ingua", "uyaka" credit the text with local colour. Besides, Ambanasom's language is generally refined and well coded to subject matter, an asset which marks him out as an accomplished chronicler.

On the strength of the foregoing discussion, it suffices to state that Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil* is a fund of ideas which enhance a review of the social customs, attitudes, and moral preferences of a people who would seem to have turned their humiliating retrogression into a cherished art form. Ambanasom burrows into their psyche and when the story rounds off, he comes forth as an enthusiastic and fine storyteller, an outstanding satirist of the seamy side of the society which seethes with all imaginable evil. His *Son of the Native Soil* must be recognised as a lyrical tribute to the culture of the Ngie and Momo people, and a major contribution to the development of the Anglophone Cameroonian novel.

Part One

Chapter One

How can Umeitoh suddenly stand up and lay claim to the entire area? Have our two villages not been farming Ukob for a long time now? Are we not all offspring of Ngiekum?

Yes, we disagreed over the land, but have we not tried to patch up our differences like brothers? Was it not six years ago that the elders of both villages agreed to avoid useless quarrels by letting each village control the section of the controversial plot nearest to its own land? What then is this new talk that I hear about land? When appetite overreaches itself it is looking for death.

These were the disturbing questions that vexed Akaya as he lay awake in the semi-darkness near his wife, Ebitu. The land dispute between Anjong and Akan was not new. It was an old quarrel dating back to the time of Ambikoh, the great grandson of the founder of the clan. The land in question was a fertile valley called Ukob. A stream flowed through the plain dividing it into two. The larger portion belonged to the Anjong side of the stream while the smaller part was on the Akan side of it. Each village in the past had laid claim to the entire valley and, although it was a source of regular conflicts between them, each had managed to farm on its own side of the stream.

Ebitu snored on. But it was not the snoring that interrupted Akaya's thoughts. He was already used to it, indeed so much so that he was nearly unaware of it. It was rather the return of life outside. Patches of light filtered through cracks in the wall and little openings on the door and windows. He had a clearer view of things in the room. A pig was grunting in its sty, while in their pen, goats bleated. Cocks crowed repeatedly; dogs barked, and birds warbled in joy. In the midst of this animal chorus could be heard voices of early risers, especially raffia-wine tappers. The main footpath was not far from Akaya's compound, but a few metres beyond it, it branched off into several tiny paths leading to different

raffia groves. The rattling sound of empty calabashes dangling from the tappers' shoulders could be heard. Some of Akaya's other wives and children were already awake and talking. Indeed there was a child crying. It was Apuya, the son of Akaya's second wife, Unyo.

'What's the matter Apu?' asked his mother.

'It's the pig,' replied the child, standing on a stone near the pigsty.

'What has the pig done?' asked the mother again, still in her house.

'It has seized the basket.'

'What?'

'The pig has taken away the food together with the basket.'

Unyo rushed to the spot, just in time to see her brand new basket nosed about in the mud by the hungry pig. It soon trampled it into the swampy mess. The woman could hardly contain her anger towards the helpless child.

'How did you hold it, you weakling? How did you hold my basket? You can only eat. Come and show me how you held it before the pig seized it from your dead hands.'

The child was already trembling from the force of her words. But she pulled him roughly by the ears and stood him on the stone to demonstrate. The frightened child, in a stooping position with both arms stretched out, re-enacted the scene that cost him tears that early morning. Had he known how much anger was boiling in his mother's breast, he would not have come to perform that dumb show. For just as he was faithfully re-enacting the role of the generous feeder, the angry mother landed on his back a blow whose force nearly sent him to join the basket in the horrible mess below.

Apuya raised a much louder cry which sent other women and children hurrying to the spot. A small group of curious people soon gathered near the pigsty. The wailing of the boy reached Ebito's hut. Akaya jumped out of bed with a start and rushed out. The first thought that came to his mind was that someone might have fallen into the fence. He was therefore relieved when, on joining the group, he took a glance at the sty and found no one in it.

'What's wrong this early morning?' he asked no one in particular.

'The pig has seized the food with the basket from Apuya's hands,' answered his daughter, Achumbia.

‘And is that enough to make a child cry as if someone has fallen from a palm tree?’

‘No, it’s his mother who has beaten him.’

‘How many times have I warned you against hitting my children, Unyo?’ he fumed at his wife.

‘Were his hands dead when he carried my basket? I say were his hands dead?’

‘Yours were alive; why didn’t they carry it?’

‘The lawyer has come. I didn’t know that a child ...’

‘Shut your mouth this morning, else you will be absent from your farm.’

He ordered the group to disperse, and then went to rouse Ebito from sleep. The first gentle attempts to wake her up failed, so he shook her violently.

‘Your own sleep is terrible. How can you sleep till noon? Won’t you go to the farm today?’

When Ebito stood up she was still feeling sleepy, but the light scathing from her husband had driven away any light film of sleep that still lingered about her. She tied her wrapper over her breasts, and rubbed her eyes with the back of her right hand before going out. Apuya was still sobbing. She asked Achumbia what the matter was. As the little girl told her the story, Ungam, her mother, was splitting wood not far away. She muttered something to herself after casting a wicked glance or two at Ebito. She was saying something to the effect that the queen had finally stood up. Although Ebito never understood what she was saying, she knew from her furtive glances that Ungam nursed ill-feelings against her.

It was just like Ungam. She was irritable whenever she was a nursing mother, the time she never shared the same room with Akaya. No matter what the chief did for her, Ungam could not be convinced that most of Akaya’s favours were not dispensed on the woman sharing his bed with him. One might then conclude that when her turn came, she would not grumble. But she still did. Ungam always considered herself the least loved of the chief’s wives.

Ebito got a broom and swept her room, scooping the wood ash into a potsherd. The ash formed a little mound in the broken piece of ceramic. As she took it out, she moved as if she was afraid to drop even a pinch of it. When she got to the edge of the courtyard,

she flung the ash forward, gripping the potsherd in both hands. It scattered into fine powdery particles that floated in the air like moving white clouds before finally settling on plantain and cocoyam leaves. Wood ash, together with other household refuse dumped among the crops growing behind the houses in the compound, made excellent manure.

By the time Ebito, also known as *Abu* Echunjei (Echunjei's mother), was halfway through her cooking, her co-wives had already finished their own morning meal. Luckily for her, it was not her turn to feed her husband that morning. That task belonged to Ungam.

Chapter Two

There was consternation in Anjong when some of their womenfolk came back from Ukob in tears. They had gone to the disputed piece of land where they were surprised by a group of young men from Akan, who seized their hoes. Such a thing had not been heard of before. Anjong interpreted it as a flagrant act of war. Chief Akaya asked his *chinda* to send an urgent message to the villages of Upper Dudum, inviting the quarter heads to an important meeting in the palace the following day. The *chinda* climbed onto the chief's mighty calling drum, *ndek*, and delivered the message.

Meanwhile, the air in Akan was heavy with war phrases and incendiary threats. Being the aggressors, the Akan people had planned the act in advance. They knew that Anjong would not take the assault on their women lying down. They were therefore on their guard and had preserved the tools seized from Anjong women in their chief's palace. Umeitoh, by nature, was a proud chief. But recently his pride and arrogance had tasted new potent wine through some of his advisers who took it as their responsibility to shape the affairs of Akan. Umeitoh was acting partly on the instigation of these war-hungry councillors and partly from his own sense of wounded pride, of being generally regarded as a distant second to Chief Akaya in Dudum. The day following the raid on the Anjong women, Akan elders and councillors assembled in Umeitoh's palace. Senior councillors were in the hall while junior ones and other observers sat on stones outside. Abaago was the first to address the gathering. He stood up in a stooping posture and clapped his hands, with the elders accompanying him in the traditional salutation of the chief. There was a mass clapping of hands three times at the end of which the chief permitted him to go ahead. Abaago began:

Mbe and the elders gathered here, there is no one who does not know why we are here now. Most of us have abandoned our personal tasks and businesses to come here. Many of us have our animals to cater for, raffia palms to tap and fowls to feed. But we have left all

of them at home because there is something more important and urgent for us to tackle.’ Then pointing to the hoes that belonged to Anjong women, he went on:

‘This is what has brought us here. Everyone has heard of how our children went and seized these hoes. But perhaps a few people do not know why they did so. There is no fault in seeking reason for an action. Those who may doubt the sanity of our action will be satisfied in a moment.’ With that he sat down.

He merely introduced the matter, the elaboration of which was the duty of the chief. Dressed in his traditional grassland attire, diminutive Chief Umeitoh readjusted his elaborately embroidered skull cap, cleared his throat and, hardly stirring on his throne, began:

‘Elders and Councillors, you have heard all that Abaago has said. When the senior councillors met here a week ago to take the decision to send our children to Ukob, all of you were not present. We did not think it necessary to assemble you for such a decision. Your special group of senior councillors was elected for such an emergency. Having done what they thought was right, they have now brought you here to educate you on their action.

‘Our land problem with Anjong is not a thing of today. We have been arguing over it for a long time now. Some of you may ask why we have now pushed it to this point. I will tell you why. The ruins of the first court hall in Dudum are in Akan. But where is the present court hall? Was the first chief in Dudum crowned by the Germans not my great grandfather? Now who is regarded as the paramount chief of Dudum? Don’t you see sense in our reasoning? If the first court hall in Dudum was in Akan before being transferred to Anjong, and the first paramount chief in Dudum from Akan before the title was given to the grandfather of Akaya by the British who defeated the Germans, don’t you see in this a gradual annexation of everything Akan by Anjong? Don’t you see that even our Ukob may soon officially become part of Anjong? Is there anyone still in doubt as to why we sent our children to Ukob?’ Umeitoh was applauded.

There was slight disorder for some time as people were murmuring in small groups. Eventually the noise died down and another councillor stood up. It was Akobata.

‘What have I to say after what Abaago and *Mbe* have said? They have said nearly all that needed to have been said. I have only a

question or two to put to the assembly. Are you all prepared to defend your legitimate rights? Are you ready to die for the piece of land justly bestowed on you by your forefathers? Or are you prepared to sit like women and watch Anjong, bit by bit, edge you out of your very houses? Beware! Anjong may well be the troublesome shrew-mouse that comes in and chases out the rat.'

He sat down and there was even greater commotion than before, a mixture of approbation and disapproval. For, even though there was general consent for hard line action, there were also a few dissenting voices.

People outside had been straining their ears to get what information they could from the hall. They were not long in being rewarded. Word soon went round that Akan had declared war on Anjong. The news was received with mixed feelings. In one corner of the courtyard, the information gave rise to almost boyish jubilation, while in another it was something akin to cynicism, doubt and disbelief. One of those who sneered at the idea of a war was Embuta.

Sitting on a stone, Embuta carefully steered his wooden leg to a comfortable position and laid his crutches aside. He looked at his leg and his face became darkened as he recalled that cruel war in which he had taken part against the Tiba people. He remembered very distinctly how the Tiba men, well-armed with good European guns, had nearly overrun their village within a short time. He was merely a child then. Before Dudum people could rally for any joined action, some of their kinsmen had been disabled and captured by the enemies. Against the formidable attack launched by Tiba, Dudum had less efficient weapons such as spears, machetes and cumbersome dane guns. Embuta had accompanied his father to Edom where most of the fighting took place. He had seen his father brought down by a bullet from a Tiba man's gun, while he himself had received a deep wound in his leg. The wound grew worse after the war and, had he not been to the mission hospital in Akom, it would have been a different story today.

That was fifty years ago. Most of those who had taken part in the war had died. He had resisted an attempt by the doctors to amputate his badly infected leg. But the wound grew worse and gave him excruciating pains, and when he could no longer endure

them, he gave in to the doctor's advice. It was then that he received the artificial leg and his first pair of crutches. That was fifty years ago. That was before most of those agitating for war today were born.

Embuta was joined by another war veteran, Asoja. Unlike Embuta, Asoja had come out of the war with his limbs intact. But he had seen enough to know that there was nothing romantic or glamorous about war: it was a down-to-earth cruel, and inhuman endeavour.

'Do they say they want war?' he asked. 'Or did I not hear well?'

'So they say, I'm told,' replied Embuta. 'We've had our own share of war reward; let them have theirs.'

'But who among those shouting for war will fight the way we did? With what weapons will they even fight? Maybe they think that war is the *Adene* dance that just about any person can dance.'

'I laugh to hear them talk excitedly as if they are preparing for an antelope hunt. They had better know with what they are flirting. They should come and see war here - on my leg. This is war. This is what they are after,' Embuta concluded, still looking at his leg.

He smiled a mirthless smile, and once more his face became clouded. But it soon brightened up a bit as he started thinking of his only grown-up son, Achamba, a secondary school teacher in Mbambe. Had it not been for his son, the leg would probably have ended his life long ago. He had taken him to several hospitals each time the wound on the stump threatened to develop into an ulcer. Achamba had cared for him just as a dutiful son should, buying him crutches, drugs, beverages and pads.

The attention of Embuta and Asoja was soon drawn to what two young men were saying. They were also talking about war, just a few steps from the veterans. Though Enguri and Akaranjoh had never fought a war, they were clearly delighted with the possibility of fighting one.

'We shall teach those KPP men a lesson.'

'There is one Amburigha in Anjong. If I can only lay hands on him!'

'The one who married Ayaiweh?'

'Yes, the very one. If I can lay hands on him, he will eat pepper from my hands.'

‘Escaping with the girl on whom you had spent all that you had. It is an unforgivable crime.’

‘If I can only get hold of him!’

The land dispute was a collective grudge borne by Akan against Anjong. Individually many, like Enguri, had old scores to settle with enemies in Anjong. The dispute afforded a real vent through which their grievances and emotions could be released. That explained, in part, the enthusiastic reception given to the idea of war.

Back in the hall it was still speeches upon speeches. One of the dissenting voices managed to be heard. It was Usobi who, like Embuta, was a war veteran. He looked weak and lean and, despite his advanced years, stood well to deliver his speech. He was not one of the councillors who had met earlier to send the young men to Ukob. That did not mean, however, that he spoke out of spite. Usobi spoke from pure conviction and on the strength of having taken part in a real war. Sensing where Usobi’s speech was drifting, Abaago attempted twice to shout him down. But Chief Umeitoh intervened.

‘Let him go on with his speech. There is no harm in listening to someone speak. By their speech we shall know who the real sons of Akan are. We will weigh them by what they say. If they utter wisdom and good counsel, we will accept them. But if they vomit out rubbish, why, we shall simply ignore them. So let Usobi remove what is in his belly for us to see.’

‘... Well, thank you, *Mbe* for coming to my aid. The world is upside down today ...’ There was a general murmur across the hall mostly in disapproval of what Abaago had done. ‘Let us leave that there,’ continued Usobi. ‘I have only one wish for Abaago, that the good turn he has done to me today be returned to him one day by another son ... I was saying that we are planning to fight a war quite different from that between Dudum and Tiba. But I wonder how many of you know anything about that war. It was a war between two different tribes. We fought a just war against a real enemy. But today we are fomenting a war in quite different circumstances. We are first offsprings of Ngiekum before we are KPP or CUP. How can brothers carry arms against brothers? Are there not some here who have married the daughters of Anjong? And are there not some here who have given their daughters to Anjong? We are a single

family. Should we declare a war against Anjong today, we are inevitably declaring a war against ourselves, a war of self-extermination. War is not a child's plaything. Most of you have not experienced it. But you can still find traces of the Dudum-Tiba war. Examples of one-legged men are many in Dudum. When you see old men around with stumps instead of arms do you think that they happily gave up their clean limbs for those? That is what we are looking for today. That is war. Those who are willing let them go ahead and fight it. And although I would sooner die than endure my various bodily aches, I would not like my death to be precipitated by a bullet or a thrust of a spear.'

The brief and rather ugly picture of war painted by Usobi had an effect on some of the people in the hall. When he had concluded his speech, an embarrassing silence hung uneasily about the room. Though only momentary, it was indicative enough. It showed that though he spoke from the position of the underdog, Usobi succeeded in touching a soft chord somewhere in the insides of the councillors. From that moment, Akan became divided over the war issue - with the majority in favour of war, among them Umeitoh, Abaago and Akobata. Since these were the buttresses of the village, it was generally taken that everyone was for war. The dissenting voices were, indeed, ignored as Umeitoh had said.

Chapter Three

If Akan expected Anjong to carry out a reprisal against them over the humiliation suffered by their womenfolk, they were completely wrong. While scandalized men in Anjong were prepared to fight to the last man, reason, nevertheless, restrained emotion, and maturity overruled youthful excitement. This was not easy to come by. It took the elders and councillors assembled in Chief Akaya's palace a great deal of time and persuasion to bring their young men on to the path of peace.

Chief Akaya and every adult in Anjong knew that the land issue was only the immediate cause of the war that threatened to break out between the principal villages. The remote and, certainly, the main causes were rooted in the power struggle between the chiefs, the question of who should rule over the whole of Dudum. Closely related to this was the question of the location of the courthouse, the postal agency and the health centre, all of which were in Anjong. The geographical location of Anjong made it a suitable site for such infrastructure, being the only village situated on a rare plain in an area largely dominated by hills and deep valleys. But Akan would not accept this, and there began their struggle.

Many people had spoken emotionally about what some termed aggression by the CUP people. The last speaker was Chief Akaya.

'Elders and councillors, young men and children of Anjong, Ndifon and Ubeno have spoken well. They have spoken just as wise men should. God was not foolish to give man a greater sense of self-control than a woman. When a woman rises and nags at her husband, it is wise for the man to hold his anger firmly and not to react immediately. If he behaves like his wife, both will be heading for disaster. No regret will remedy the folly of such rashness. The stream went astray because it was alone. It is the responsibility of the old to curb the excesses of the young. And this is what Ndifon and Ubeno have done. I thank them very sincerely for their advice against war.

‘Some will term this cowardice or weakness. But it is not so. It takes courage to arrive at such a decision. For it is easier to start a war than to end it. Akan has slapped us in the face once. Let us not retort yet. Let us, like the adder, allow them to slap us six more times, bringing our venom to a deadly point. No medicine man will reverse the effect of our mortal blow on them when it finally comes. Nevertheless, I do not mean that we should not be on our guard. Should they be arrogant and foolhardy enough to carry their provocation right into our home, we should certainly strike back. They will then know who of the two of us is the widow. A Dudum proverb says fast blazing wood soon burns itself out, but the slow smouldering log retains its fire much longer.

‘For the moment let us seek a peaceful solution to the problem. Serious thought had not been given to this issue in the past because at no time had it reached a point, like now, when human lives were threatened. Some of you believe that we ought to farm across the stream, but I disagree. My father told me that Anjong never used to cross the stream to farm at Ukob. While I do not support crossing the stream, I would not tolerate any attempt by Akan to encroach on our own portion. The senior councillors will send envoys to Akan to choose a day on which to give us a live squirrel if they really cross the stream. Well, if they succeed, they own the land, for the squirrel does not lie. But if they fail, we will see if we can give them one.’ He concluded and the members dispersed, some satisfied and others not.

Akaya’s homestead consisted of six houses built in such a way that they formed a large courtyard in the centre. Two of the houses were his, and the rest belonged to his four wives. Five of the houses could be said to be modern in the sense that they were built on a rectangular-stone foundation with their walls made of sun-baked bricks. They were roofed with corrugated iron sheets. The internal structure of his wives’ houses was identical. There was a bamboo ceiling at the corner of which was an opening leading to an attic. Wood, kernels, and bamboo splinters were stored there. A ladder was always at hand to help one to get to the attic. On two sides of

the room were bamboo or mud beds separated by a fireplace in the centre. The hearth consisted of a tripod of stones partially leaning on a mud pillar, in turn strongly supported by three tree-trunks which equally served as the central column for the ceiling. There were four other pillars supporting the ceiling from each corner of the room. The hearth faced the main door into the house. Behind it was a thin partition of bamboo that screened off the interior part of the room and in which were stored assorted household utensils such as wooden dishes and plates, clay and aluminium pots, spoons, calabashes or tins of oil, and mortars. Each wife had a barn directly behind her house for storing cocoyams, plantains and other raw food items.

At a good distance from the houses were a pigsty and a hut in which goats were kept. A section of the pen was also reserved for fowls. Close to the centre of the courtyard stood the talking drum, *ndek*, well-protected from rain by a thatched shed. The talking drum was a gigantic iroko trunk that had been skilfully fashioned by a great carver. There was an opening in the centre, a gaping mouth with two 'lips' that were beaten with two well-cut bamboo sticks to produce a deep and exciting sound. In a hilly area like Dudum it was a major means of communication. Messages could be sent over it to areas miles away.

Of the two houses belonging to the chief, one was just like any of his wives' except that it was larger, with a much more simplified interior. It had a central room, which at the same time was the main hall in the palace, without a fireplace. Discussions of a serious nature were held there. The other three rooms, two of which opened into the hall, contained the chief's valuable possessions. In one of them was his bed where his wives attended to his needs alternately.

In contrast, the other house, the one he inherited from the late chief, his father, was traditionally built. It was a rounded structure of bamboo, sticks and mud, built on a well-beaten circular mud foundation. Its conical thatched roof had been blackened by smoke. Externally, the hut was a picture of interesting ruin. Its mud foundation had cracks here and there, while its moth-eaten sticks stuck out from the thin walls rather uneasily like ribs from a decaying body. The thatch had had a rough time with the weather. It had lost its beautiful plaited pattern and was reduced to a mass of plain work.

The interior was different from that of the modern houses. There was a hole with a piece of flat rock covering it on the floor near the door. Here Akaya poured libation to the spirits of his revered ancestors. There was always a smouldering-log fire in the hearth to provide warmth to the departed souls.

At any time in the day, one invariably saw a trail of tiny smoke coming out of the tip of the conical roof, now in spirals, then in curls like the top of a volcano whose eruption was dying down. On some cold or rainy nights Akaya slept in the hut; he received most of his local guests there.

It was in this hut that Akaya sat eating a meal of porridge five days after the great meeting that was held in the palace. By his side was a small calabash of raffia wine while his horn, half empty of the liquor leaned against the mud pillar at the fireplace. He had already poured part of the wine into the ancestral hole. With three crooked fingers Akaya took porridge and passed it into his mouth. Though he had many spoons, he always preferred using his fingers when eating porridge. He stretched out his left arm and took the horn and, after licking his fingers carefully, passed it into the right hand. He drank some of the wine and holding part of it in his mouth, gargled it before gulping it down audibly. He cleared his throat, refilled the horn and had another gulp.

‘Apu,’ he called out to his little son. ‘Apuya.’

Mbe-e-e.

‘Come and remove this dish.’ The child came and collected the remains of the food and retired to his mother’s house.

Akaya picked up a piece of broomstick, broke it, pared it and started to pick his teeth in quiet contentment. It was when he was doing this that he heard the voice of Ekunidi somewhere in the courtyard. Ekunidi was his in-law and the quarter head of Afed. Apuya came and announced the arrival of the in-law who was ready to see the chief. Ekunidi entered the hut, sat on a stool and clapped his hands three times, each followed by *Mbe, Mbe, Mbe*. Akaya then greeted him.

‘Ekunidi, you are well?’

‘I’m well, *Mbe.*’

‘How are your people?’

‘They’re a bit strong, *Mbe.*’

‘Good.’

Akaya sent for Ebito. She greeted Ekunidi when she came in and then sat on a low stool, waiting for the chief's orders.

'What does *Ataa* want me to do?' she asked.

'Haven't you seen Ekunidi? Is there nothing for him to eat?'

'The cocoyams will soon be ready, *Mbe*.'

'When will you ever learn to cook your food for a man to eat in time Ebito? Do you want my visitor to put raffia wine into an empty stomach?'

'Don't worry, *Mbe*. I ate in my own house before coming,' Ekunidi intervened.

'I have never seen a more sluggish person in my compound than this Ebito!'

'I say I have eaten already, *Mbe*.'

'I've never been told that a visitor is ever too full to eat in a host's house.'

The chief asked his wife to bring them some cashew-nuts.

She brought them four. Akaya took two and gave two to Ekunidi. Each of them threw a nut into his mouth, cracked it with his teeth, took it out and threw away the shucks, before eating the seed. Akaya then asked Ekunidi whether he did not have his horn in his raffia bag. Ekunidi brought it out, held it at the tail and then beat its side on his right thigh. He rubbed it with his palms and passed his forefinger quickly along the rim to make sure there was no speck to contaminate his drink. The chief told him to serve himself. With his left hand, Ekunidi respectfully brought the royal calabash on to his left thigh and then, tilting it, poured the drink into his horn. It foamed and some of it spilled over, emitting an appetizing fragrance. Ekunidi's mouth watered. He took a sustained pull at the cup until it was empty. He refilled the horn and then put down the calabash.

'Whose tapping knife is this?' he asked after a sip.

'Well, I'll try you. Guess whose it is.'

'Is it Ebiritu's?'

'No, it isn't.'

'Is it Anufon's?'

'No.'

'Tell me. I've been defeated. Is it Ajaabi's? It must be Ajaabi's tapping knife. Whose else can it be if it isn't Ajaabi's?'

'No. Ajaabi no longer taps good wine. Ajaabi's raffia is getting old. The stuff that comes from it now is not different from water from the stream.'

'All right, tell me who the owner of this fragrant medicine is.'

'It's Usonjim, the son of Ebuika of Abebung.'

'Why didn't I think of Ebuika's son? His knife is as good as his father's.'

'He starves himself well unlike most of the other young men who eat just anything and produce wine not better than running water. It is the result of self-discipline.'

'I agree. A woman taking three horns of this *atupid* will yield to a man before realizing what she has done.'

'I assure you there are women who can take even five and will still know where they are.'

'I don't call those women. Those are witches who drain large pots of wine. Women like those are to be dreaded. You will never possess a drop of liquid in your house if you are married to such!'

Ekunidi began to shift the topic to the one which had really brought him to the palace. Then he asked Akaya whether he had heard from his daughter, Echunjei. Akaya said she had not yet written since she left home at the end of the previous holidays.

Echunjei was the only child from the royal family in college; she was the third daughter of Ebito, her two elder sisters having married already. Like most girls of her generation, Echunjei had been betrothed when she was a little girl, only about five years old at the time. She took very much after her mother. She was of a fair complexion, slender and tall. But she had been sickly while very young, and was said to have been molested by wizards who nearly took away her life. And had Akaya not engaged powerful witch doctors from Mengom, his daughter would probably have died. It took Mbeika three months to successfully battle the spirits that harassed Echunjei. That was the last major bout of illness she suffered while still in Anjong Primary School. By the time she entered Girls' College in Nkoman, Echunjei was growing into an admirable beauty.

Eziaga, Ekunidi's son to whom she was betrothed, did not go beyond the primary school. In the primary school at Anjong both never really had a warm relationship. Eziaga was Echunjei's elder by seven years, but while he regularly sought her company, especially

after school, she sometimes avoided him. That did not worry him very much. He knew that she was still young and childish. They did exchange a few letters though, and nothing threatened their already sanctioned marriage until Echunjei passed the entrance examination into the Girls' College.

After Echunjei had been in college for two years, Eziaga became more and more worried as teachers and students became interested in her. She began to show declining interest in him. He wrote her several letters, but it took her a long time to reply to any of them. And when the reply came, it was really empty, a flat letter. There was nothing in it to please him. He wrote her again, but she did not reply. Eziaga complained to his father about Echunjei's strange ways.

Ekunidi had therefore come to Akaya's house with the intention of sounding the chief out on his son's anxiety. He was thus skilfully introducing the problem when he asked Akaya whether his daughter had written.

'Do you know whether she is not well?' asked Ekunidi.

'No. But why do you ask that? Has anything happened to her? Tell me.'

'Don't be anxious, *Mbe*. I don't think there is anything wrong with her.'

'By your questions one would think you have something on your mind.'

'Well, it's really nothing, *Mbe*. Only that my son complains that he wrote her and she did not reply.'

'Is that all?'

'It is, *Mbe*.'

'Maybe she's too busy to write your son. I told you she had not even written me.'

'If she is unable to write because of her work, then there is no trouble. But my son seems to have noticed a real change in her.'

'Young men are like that. They cannot be patient. What does your son mean? I guess he now suspects that someone has come to see me because of her. I am not a child. We have agreed that Echunjei will be your son's wife. Let him not fear anything. He should only be patient. His betrothed will soon finish her course; let him not fear, you hear me?'

'Yes, *Mbe*, I do. I'm glad.'

Chapter Four

Dudum Clan was a grassland settlement of two main chiefdoms, with their many villages flung and scattered over hills and valleys, in the North-West Province. After meandering through the tortuous landscape, the provincial road from Nkoman got to Tinako'o. The latter, sitting comfortably on a little plateau, was the gateway to Dudum. From here the serpentine road wound its way through the village and continued to the next, Etwii, before taking a dangerous downward plunge, as it headed for Anjong, passing over a stony, bumpy hillside until it got to Anjong valley, a rare plain in that hilly area.

A central village in Dudum, Anjong, was the parting of the ways, the place where the road forked. The right branch, now much reduced in breadth, continued to Ebang and the other villages of Upper Dudum. The left branch, much narrower, wound its way further down to the south, in the same direction with River Feg to Akan and the other villages of Lower Dudum.

If to get to Anjong the road passed over rough terrain, the patch of it going from Anjong to Akan was bedevilled by even more hurdles: more rocks, steeper hills and narrower passages between hills, holding in check the Spartan effort of the Akan people to attempt to reduce communication barriers between them and the rest of Dudum.

Anjong plain was encircled by a range of hills, some with boulders jutting out rather menacingly, and others with wet, rocky surfaces dripping with water all year round. The area had fast flowing mountain streams, springs and sparkling brooks. In the rainy season these rivulets, often in spate, emptied into River Feg. The full river rushed down deep gorges and roaring dells, through the sub-tropical vegetation of Lower Dudum, before, in turn, flowing itself into the drumming dwelling-place of the spirit of Ngiekum: the enchanted Dudum Falls.

There were a total of nineteen villages in Dudum and they fell under two distinct geographical zones. Upper Dudum, led by Anjong, consisted of fifteen villages in the savannah to the north, the main ones being Achang, Azem, Tin, Afed and Ebang. On the other hand, Lower Dudum, commanded by Akan, belonged to the oil-palm zone to the south with a total of four villages including Etoh, Uding and Ajei. History helped to emphasize the differences between these groups of people who were, nevertheless, the offspring of Ngiekum, their patriarch. When the first Presbyterian missionaries came to Dudum, they chose Anjong as their headquarters in the area. And the Catholics, when they in turn arrived, chose Akan for the seat of their church. The multi-party days in Cameroon did not make things easier for Dudum people who soon found themselves in opposing political camps: the Kamerun People's Party and the Cameroon United People. These were the major political parties in the then British Cameroon. The Kamerun People's Party thrived in Anjong while the Cameroon United People found its stronghold in Akan.

Though multi-party politics had come and gone, it had left incurable ulcers on Dudum people; it had left them worse than it met them. In a relatively obscure corner of Cameroon like Dudum, about five hundred kilometres from the nation's capital, you heard people occasionally refer to their enemies as KPP or CUP men as if both rival parties had not been wiped out many years before, when the CNO, the Cameroon National Organisation, was born.

Whenever there was a conflict between the major villages, such as the controversy over Ukob, or the question of who should be the acknowledged leader of the clan, the lesser chiefs or quarter heads took sides with their bulwark against the opposite camp. An issue that concerned Umeitoh necessarily became the problem of the other smaller chiefs under him. The same was true for Akaya of Anjong. Yet these people were bound in blood; they were all descendants of Ngiekum. They spoke one language; they drew life from a common source; they drank the same water from River Feg, the very river that emptied into Dudum Falls, the Sacred Shrine of Ngiekum....

The senior councillors of Anjong met and decided to send three emissaries to Akan as they had planned. The envoys were Angang, Usonjim and Ebiritu. They were cautioned not to provoke the

people of Akan into a war. That was why Angang was among them. Without him, there was no guarantee of a peaceful mission. His presence was a moderating force to keep in check the uncertain tempers of his kinsmen. They would only ask Chief Umeitoh to appoint a day and place for the live-squirrel hunt. Angang and his companions would appeal to Umeitoh to release the tools his young men had seized from Anjong women.

The envoys set out for Akan on an *Ichong* morning. On the way they passed two Anjong women going to their farms. When the men were beyond earshot, the women started commenting on their mission, for they knew why the men were going to Akan.

‘Why should they now?’ asked Anjo sneeringly.

‘Maybe they have at last realized that hunger is not for women alone.’

‘First it was Nyeba, and now it is Ukob. When you have men as weak as ours what do you expect from people like those in Akan? They grind pepper on your head.’

Perhaps the women were a little too hard on their men folk and Chief Akaya. Nyeba was the best part of Anjong around the primary school. Here were situated the health centre, the courthouse and the maternity home. Nyeba had been a fertile farming area and the only suitable spot for any important settlement. Chief Akaya had been advised by Ubeno the politician to reserve Nyeba for future use in case the government granted Dudum a sub-division. Thus the chief had asked all those families that had farms in Nyeba to surrender them for official use. Needless to say, some families were badly affected, especially those with no fertile farming areas elsewhere. Anjong politicians had taken their cue from those of Akan.

Umeitoh, at Abaago’s behest, had preserved their best land, Ugum, for a possible government residential area. Abaago had pointed out to the chief the danger of letting the people occupy the area. He said if that happened, Akan would lose when an administrative centre was given to Dudum. In that case, he said, Anjong would be the winner.

‘You should think of tomorrow, *Mbe*,’ he told Umeitoh. ‘Things will not remain as they are today. The world will change, and our children will curse us if we leave them nothing of value. Anjong

has already had enough. It would be a mistake on our part if we allow any other innovation in Dudum to remain in Anjong. We should encourage our people to resettle around Ugum in order to boost the growth of a township there, but leaving the central portion for a government centre.'

Anjong and Akan were only two kilometres away from each other. The emissaries soon arrived in Umeitoh's palace. They spoke to the *chinda* who informed the chief that there were visitors from Anjong. The chief sent for Abaago and Akobata with whom he first conferred before asking the *chinda* to bring in the visitors. The three entered in a stooping posture and instinctively chose a corner for themselves opposite the chief. They sat down and then, very courteously, greeted him. All of them humbly clapped their hands three times, punctuated with 'Mbe, Mbe, Mbe.' After the salutation Umeitoh then inquired after Anjong people.

'They're well, *Mbe*,' replied Angang.

'Except hunger,' put in Ebiritu tactlessly. Angang nudged him to hold his peace, for anyone but a fool knew where he was heading.

'Well, hunger is everywhere,' said the chief. 'What about Akaya, is he

well?'

'He's well, *Mbe*,' replied Angang, 'and he has asked us to convey his best wishes to you and your people.'

'Good,' said Umeitoh. 'What is the object of your visit? Is it war you bring? Tell us.'

Angang smiled broadly and said that they were not messengers of war but peace.

'We haven't brought war, *Mbe*. We don't have any weapons on us. We bring peace from our chief and people.'

'What is the message of peace?'

'Akaya has asked you to kindly release the objects seized from our women and has also suggested that we solve our problems peacefully.'

'What problems have we got to solve?'

'The land problems. That you must give us a squirrel to justify your claim over all of Ukob,' butted in Usonjim rather indiscreetly to the surprise of Angang.

'What has that one said?' asked Abaago in anger. 'I say what does that one say? That we should justify our claim over our own land? Young man weigh your words, before vomiting them out here.'

'Forgive him, *Mbe*,' Angang again intervened. 'It is Usonjim's way of talking. He did not mean to be rude.'

'Let them speak in their own way, Abaago,' said the chief. 'Do not interrupt them. They know where they are. They are not in a liquor house. If they speak like drunkards, we shall know what answer to give them. We shall answer them in the manner of drunkards. Do not interrupt them.'

The talks went on, with tempers flaring up from each side. But Angang managed his companions with skill; this prevented the talks from ending in a deadlock. He countered the hard line position adopted by Umeitoh and his people with softness, and appealed to their humanity. The long discussions finally ended, and a stalemate was avoided. Akan agreed to release the objects, and chose a day for the squirrel chase. It was the following *Ichong* at Iteubugi.

In fact, it was not easy to arrive at an agreement. The chief and his councillors had conferred privately twice on the issue before taking a stand. While Abaago vehemently opposed it, Umeitoh, on the strength of the information passed unto him by his own late father, reassured him that there was no doubt that the whole of Ukob was theirs. Consequently, the squirrel, he thought, would vindicate them.

It was not the custom of Dudum people to receive their visitors - friendly or unfriendly - without entertaining them. The urgency of Angang's mission did not permit immediate entertainment. However, after the discussions, Umeitoh sent for decent raffia wine and asked one of his wives to give the strangers food. When the visitors had eaten, the wine was brought. The chief asked the *chinda* to show it to Angang to uncork. He held it out to Angang who pulled off the bunch of fresh raffia leaves sealing the mouth of the gourd. Then the *chinda* turned and first served the chief who poured the wine into the ancestral hole. His horn was refilled and he drank. The others could now be served. Three kola-nuts were brought. Umeitoh

took one and broke it. There were four lobes and he threw them on the floor. All faced up.

‘Well, they’re clean,’ said the chief. ‘Look at them Angang, they’re clean.’

He picked up the lobes, held them in his closed fist, and shook it while muttering something to himself. Then he cast them down again. This time three of the lobes faced down and one up. Umeitoh beamed. Everyone was equally studying the message of the kola-nut.

‘You see what the kola-nut is saying? There is one mouth. There, that one looking up. It has agreed with us, that what we Akan are saying is true. We are unanimous in our cause. Angang, have you seen?’

‘I have, *Mbe*. It is really one mouth.’

The chief picked up the four lobes. This time he threw one into his mouth and gave the others to the other people. But the lobes were not enough, so the remaining kola-nuts were broken and distributed. The men then chatted away on lighter topics.

And when the entertainment was over, the three men took their leave, carrying their women’s hoes. The only elderly man they met on leaving the palace was Usobi. Usobi was going to render a visit to his old-time friend, Embuta. When he saw what the three men were carrying, he knew that the war which threatened to break out had, somehow, been averted. But he was surprised that Abaago and the others had released the tools. Did they not say that the objects had been confiscated forever? Did they not say that they were going to teach the Anjong people an unforgettable lesson? Usobi had proposed the return of the hoes, and a pacific approach to the issue, but he had been overruled. No, they should go ahead and fight.

Usobi got to Embuta’s house when the latter was enjoying his tobacco by the smouldering-log fire in his hut. They exchanged greetings and Usobi took a seat on the other side of the fireplace. The fine flavour from the tobacco made Usobi hungry for a smoke. He asked Embuta to let him have a puff or two. Embuta took away the pipe from his mouth, spat contentedly and picked up a piece of broomstick.

He stirred the tobacco in the pipe and gave it to his friend. Usobi wiped the pipe and passed it into his mouth and, after three successive puffs, said:

‘This is excellent tobacco. Who did you buy it from?’

‘That is Andibinda’s tobacco. There are only two people whose tobacco I enjoy. The other one is Apong.’

‘I’m used to Apong’s tobacco. But I didn’t know that Andibinda’s had changed. He used to sell bad tobacco.’

‘At first, yes. But now Andibinda is one of the best to me. If I don’t find Andibinda or Apong in the market, I just return home. The other tobacco traders are no good. Their stuff keeps saliva welling up in your mouth.’

‘And you go on spitting disgustedly like a pregnant woman.’

Changing the topic, Usobi told Embuta how he had seen three Anjong men leaving the palace with the hoes. It was a welcome sign to Embuta who, like Usobi, hoped that Akan would not be goaded into a senseless war by people like Abaago. Embuta’s great concern was not that he feared to die. It was rather the fear that he might die without seeing his grandson. If his son, Achamba, did not get married and beget a son before he (Embuta) died, he would be miserable.

‘But I have been advising him,’ he told Usobi ‘to get married but he keeps on postponing.’

‘The children of today are not like those of yesterday. Perhaps he wants a girl who knows a lot of book like him.’

‘There are many here at home. Which educated girl does he want and cannot find here in Akan? He would not want me to look for a girl for him. Where does he think this leg is leading me to? Does he think that I am growing younger? I will tell him my mind when he comes home.’ Then looking at the ceiling Embuta told Usobi, ‘Bring down that calabash.’

There was a little calabash of raffia wine suspended from the ceiling by means of a rope round its neck. It was hanging directly above the hearth. Usobi brought it down and served Embuta before pouring himself a measure. Both tipped a bit of the wine into the hole on the floor before drinking.

When they had finished drinking, Usobi took leave of his friend. But as he walked across the courtyard, he could not quite take away his admiring eyes from Embuta’s impressive compound. It consisted of three houses: a traditional hut and two modern houses. The traditional structure was Embuta’s favourite hut where he had

received his friend. It was constructed out of sticks, bamboos and mud, and upon a circular mud-foundation, with a thatched roof.

Each of the other two houses was built on a rectangular stone-foundation. The one was a long building of sun-dried blocks with its roof made of corrugated iron sheets. It was partitioned into two. One half of it was occupied by Achamba's mother, and the other by Embuta's second wife. The construction had been partly financed by Achamba with support from in-laws married to some of Embuta's daughters.

But the other, the third and the latest building, was Achamba's sole effort. He had built it from his salary as a secondary school teacher. Its walls were of sun-dried blocks with cement chinking, plastered with sand and cement. It was professionally roofed with good quality corrugated iron sheets. With a smooth cemented floor the house contained a parlour and four rooms, two belonging to Achamba and the other two to his younger brothers.

The external walls were beautifully coated with brown oil-paint while the inner ones were of grey oil-colour. The parlour was still sparsely furnished, though, and displayed attractive wall-pictures and charts. Nevertheless, for a house in the village, the building was impressive indeed, both from within and without.

The hut stood a little distance away from the two modern houses, with a spacious courtyard in the centre. The latter was an attractive playground for children, and an arena for celebrations. Despite Embuta's misfortune in the war, Usobi thought, the war veteran was lucky in his son. For who could not be proud of a son like Achamba with such a magnificent building in his father's compound? Yes, Embuta was lucky in his son. Though he was working outside the clan, Achamba did not allow himself to get carried away by the world to forget about his village and parents. A real son of the soil, he was.

Chapter Five

As far as politics in Dudum was concerned, two men were more prominent than all the others. They were Abaago of Akan and Ubeno of Anjong. Not that they had been very successful politicians: in fact they had never played any major political role beyond their division. But in their locality, they were often discussed. Abaago and Ubeno had risen to great heights in the days of multi-party politics. Unlike most of their unfortunate kinsmen of the same generation, these politicians had scrambled up to the higher classes of the primary school and prided themselves on their good old higher standards. To them Standard Six or Five of those days was superior to what was now called Class Six or Seven. For how many of the so-called Class Seven pupils, even with their First School Leaving Certificate, could speak good English? Very few could write an intelligent letter.

Abaago was in his mid-forties and of average stature. An ebullient man with an attractive voice and an intelligent face, he was endowed with the kind of handsomeness that intimidated less handsome people. Generally a jovial person Abaago often put on an enticing smile when in good mood. A man of taste in matters of clothes he was fond of jumpers worn over trousers and low-heeled shoes. But on important public occasions he invariably wore his immaculate white *agbada* with a nice felt hat.

However, Abaago had a major weakness. He was extremely partisan, very uncompromising and decidedly vocal as far as the cause of his village was concerned. To an opponent he was a formidable and stubborn adversary; to a friend, a wonderful, protective bulwark; and to both, a man of charisma and forcefulness.

Ubeno was just a few years older than Abaago. A rather small man, he was plain and disciplined in appearance. Already balding with a slightly receding forehead and eyes full of life, Ubeno looked like a rock, with strong, rustic features. And his was the ruggedness of a man brought up in difficult circumstances such as were not lacking in the rough landscape of Dudum.

He had a strong, metallic voice, and shunned adornment in his dressing. Often he would be found in a simple, non-flowery shirt over a khaki or dark pair of trousers and well-buckled leather sandals. Ubeno had an iron grip in his handshake, and his hands were not without a certain callousness produced by the regular gripping of farming implements or the occasional wrenching of weeds from his farms.

Cool and level-headed Ubeno was a dependable asset to his people. He was admired more for his self-composure than for his appearance. And as one of the councillors of his village, he commanded much respect from both his chief and the villagers, for his opinion carried a lot of clout.

Both Abaago and Ubeno had gone out to the coastal areas to work with the famous Cameroon Development Corporation, CDC. Abaago was a timekeeper in Mpundu, and Ubeno, an overseer in the rubber plantation in Meanjia. The sophistication they had acquired from contact with the other ethnic groups and foreigners enhanced their own standing in the minds of their people at home. After some time, Ubeno resigned and returned home to open up a coffee farm. Three years later, Abaago also returned home. Lower Dudum not being suitable for Robusta coffee, Abaago opened up an oil-palm and cocoa nursery with the help of a private company. He advised the Akan people that cocoa could do well in their sub-tropical area. Many joined him in growing the crop though some complained that it would not do well enough to pay off their efforts. With persuasion, Abaago insisted that they should go on, and that the future would prove him right. He said those who did not grow cocoa would regret it. Abaago's intention was good. But in an area like Dudum, with the constant erosion of the soil by rain water, and the presence of plant diseases like *apanama*, it was a difficult task to battle these destructive agents with empty hands. Government was slow in granting the poor farmers subsidies; hence many years after launching his ambitious project, Abaago was still to achieve his objectives.

No one, not even the headmasters of Akan and Anjong schools, could equal Ubeno and Abaago in the use of the English Language. They were called speakers of *Ukara*, because, as much as possible, they would rather speak in the more dignifying and mystifying white

man's tongue than use their own less respected language. When the two rival political parties in Cameroon came to Dudum, they found these individuals ready agents through whom they could access the local population.

Anjong, because of its central position, was the first village in Dudum to welcome the candidates of the parties. The first party candidate to appear in Dudum was that of the Kamerun People's Party. That day was Anjong market day. Since the roads to this part of the country were bad and sometimes impassable, the KPP candidate did not want to damage his new car for the sake of a few village votes. So he parked it in a garage in Nkoman town and hired an old Land rover to take him and his group to Dudum. He bought a few bags of salt, five crates of beer and a bottle of whisky. Those were vital campaign items in a local area.

The market was not yet full when the campaign team arrived. It was a little too early. Lines of women and other traders were still gradually streaming into the market from the four corners of Dudum. There was plenty of time. The team from town was led to the palace. After paying tribute to the chief, the group introduced themselves. Ubeno, who was already in the palace, was soon taken note of as another influential man after Akaya.

Though Chief Akaya could speak good English, he preferred addressing the visitors in his language. Ubeno naturally became the interpreter. Akaya accepted the 'kola-nut' brought by the KPP men, and some of the beer was drunk. The bottle of whisky was preserved. The chief in turn gave the group a large jar of raffia wine and some food.

Akaya and the team were later heralded into the already roaring market by the royal trumpeter. At the sound of the trumpet, the market was in a stir. People hurried here and there with whatever they were carrying. Women dragged their younger children and sat near their wares. Everyone knew at once that there was an important message to be delivered to the people. The chief rarely went to the market, and when he did, it was to make an important announcement personally. His presence underlined the urgency or importance of the situation.

After the trumpeter, the chief arrived, flanked by his councillors and *chindas*. Fifty years of age, Chief Akaya was a man of average stature. He was dressed in his traditional grassland garb. His richly embroidered ceremonial gown looked very fresh. It was matched with a beautifully decorated skull cap from which was quivering a long, dignified red feather. The chief was wearing a pair of leather shoes with no socks. Symbolizing his regal power, a heavily ornamented sceptre in his right hand completed his royal attire. The trumpet blared louder, and a few people still loitering about scrambled for seats, some sitting on stones, tree-trunks and bamboo stools, while others sat on the bare ground. The market was very quiet now.

Chief Akaya introduced the leader of the group and appealed to the population to pay particular attention to what the politician was going to tell them. He gave them some explanation of the words ‘politics’ and ‘elections’ and then left the candidate to address the crowd. The candidate, through Ubeno, spoke to Dudum people. He gave an explanation of some of the terms that repeatedly featured in his speech. He promised the Dudum people lots of help if they voted for him in the not-too-distant elections. Some of the promises included the tarring of the poor road linking the area to the provincial headquarters, and the taking over of some primary schools by the government so that parents would not pay any more fees. Indeed, he went on, his party would open a secondary school in Dudum and also reduce the prices of all the imported goods and articles that consumers bought. The people roared and cheered, and the politician went on and on, dishing out to the excited people what they wanted to hear. At the end of the speech the chief made more remarks assuring the people that KPP would do a great deal for them if they joined him in voting for its candidate.

The team retired to the palace, leaving the impressed population behind to continue with their businesses. In the palace the politicians drank more beer mixed with raffia wine. By the time the campaign team left Dudum, Ubeno was already enlisted as an indispensable representative of the party in the area. The KPP candidate gave out a few sparkling pound notes to Chief Akaya and Ubeno, saying that they were merely shaking hands. A lot more was going to come after the elections. He told them to do their best to educate the people on the principles of the party.

Meanwhile the Cameroon United People, the rival political party, had visited other areas except Dudum. They counted the local-market days and the nearest after Anjong market day was that of Akan. That was *Njed*. They also hired a Land rover for Dudum on *Njed* almost in the same way as the KPP had visited Anjong. But not the entire portion of the road linking Anjong to Akan was motorable. A little section of it was still under construction. So the Cameroon United People team was forced to unload their Land rover and walk the unfinished part of the road when they arrived at the end of the motorable section. The crates of beer, bags of salt, and tablets of soap did not present any problem to the campaigners since the latter were many in number. They parked their Land rover and carried the presents to Akan.

They were even more warmly received by Umeitoh than Akaya had received the KPP. The warmth of the reception was not out of recognition of any attractive principles in the CUP party platform. Whether the party had promises for them or not, Umeitoh was ready to welcome the CUP, if only because his arch-enemy had welcomed the KPP. It was thus out of the traditional rivalry between Akan and Anjong that Umeitoh gave the CUP group more than just a simple welcome. The people were overwhelmed. Abaago's broad smile and affability made him likable to the politicians with whom he readily entered into a conversation.

The CUP men spoke to the people in Akan market, condemning the KPP whom they branded liars. They assured the listeners that only the CUP could rescue the entire nation from the ruins into which the colonial masters had thrown the people. They promised Dudum a sub-division which would come with many other things such as a hospital, a Post Office, a college and a tarred road leading to Nkoman. The listeners clapped and roared for joy. Some of them who had been persuaded in Anjong to call themselves KPP men were now won over by this clarion call.

Before the CUP people left they asked Umeitoh to give them a man who, besides the chief, would co-ordinate activities of the party in Dudum. With no hesitation Umeitoh designated Abaago who had already distinguished himself through his articulateness, infectious joviality, and handsomeness. They gave all that they had brought to the chief and his collaborators, and then left for Nkoman.

On their way to town they nevertheless paid a courtesy visit to Chief Akaya. It would be imprudent for them to carry all their eggs in one basket. They lectured him on their party, trying to uproot all that had been planted by KPP. They noticed a big difference between Akaya's attitude towards them and Umeitoh's: Chief Akaya was not as favourably disposed towards them as the Akan chief. It was indicative of the depth of KPP's roots in Anjong, at least with their chief. Among the presents given to Akaya were a few bottles of beer, a bottle of gin, five packets of cheap cigarettes, and a few pound notes. Akaya's conscience did not trouble him a bit because of this apparent double-dealing. After all, he asked himself, did he go out to ask the politicians for the gifts? Let them come to his compound and give him whatever thing they liked. He would never refuse anything. In a fight between two men, was the stronger man not he who had more power? Let the man with a heavier bag win.....

While Ubeno was campaigning in one part of Dudum for supporters of the KPP, Abaago was in the other part doing the same thing for the CUP. Dudum had never been so animated and polarized. The whole area was alive with excitement and expectation. People discussed nothing but politics. As time went on they received a handful of T-shirts and party pamphlets from their bosses in the party's headquarters. On the front part of each T-shirt were marked in bold black letters the initials of each party. Below the letters were political slogans. The slogan carried by the CUP T-shirt and which also appeared on the printed pamphlets ran thus: 'By Their Fruit You Shall Know Them.' That of KPP was, 'Food, Job, Clothing For All.' While the pamphlets were generously distributed to listeners at campaign rallies, the few T-shirts were the property of very close collaborators and party militants.

Sometimes Abaago and Ubeno clashed and exchanged bitter words, but to the surprise of the common people the heroes generally appeared friendly afterwards. People could not understand how two men could discredit each other and still remain less bitter later on. Every little corner of Dudum had sympathizers of both parties. It was not therefore a question of a section of Dudum belonging exclusively to this or that party.

But generally Upper Dudum was dominated by KPP while Lower Dudum was predominantly CUP. As the campaign intensified, so

did the hostility between the supporters. While Ubeno and Abaago exercised some restraint, their subordinates failed to emulate them. They nursed hatred against opponents. Some waylaid teams of enemy campaigners and beat them up. And as the practice became widespread, Abaago and Ubeno could not help recruiting thugs to defend themselves against attacks.

A fight broke out in the small market of Tin between Abaago's supporters, and Ubeno's body guards. Adherents of Ubeno's party in Tin joined his thugs against their own kinsmen who were Abaago's supporters. Many were wounded on both sides, and this was only one of several incidents that occurred in many parts of Dudum.

On the way to the market, and in liquor houses, political opponents would enter into a heated argument which often resulted in abusive language. The presence of a non-party member in a group was intolerable. But after all this fuss, what did the Dudum people gain? The elections came and the KPP won. There was joy among their supporters in Dudum and other places in Cameroon. What the Party did to Dudum was to choose Chief Akaya as one of the provincial chiefs in the National House of Chiefs. But the appointment lasted only five months after which the House was dissolved. Ubeno was given more power to create more cells and branches of the party in all of Dudum. The promises that were made were shoved into the campaign shelf until the next elections.

But the next elections were never held. The campaigns were, however, carried out in the usual feverishness, with CUP vehemently denouncing the KPP. They said KPP had failed woefully to satisfy the people, and that they had not fulfilled their campaign promises. Dudum supporters of KPP were really disappointed because they had hoped that the Dudum-Bamenda road was to be improved upon. KPP's credibility was gradually eroding. The reverse was true of CUP, though they too were yet to be tested. The upcoming elections were probably going to favour CUP whose militants were very optimistic.

But just as election fever was spreading all over the country like wild fire, behold, there was born a new party, the Cameroon National Organisation, the CNO, the unitary party. And, overnight, all political wrangles were wiped out in one swift move of political ingenuity. The CNO took over most mission primary schools to the

relief of many struggling parents. Thus ended multi-party politics. That was a long time ago. But ten or more years after the death of KPP and CUP their negative impact was still felt in Dudum.

Chapter Six

O n the chosen day for the squirrel hunt, the two teams of hunters from Anjong and Akan were already at Iteubugi, a flora rich in its fauna, with particular reference to the squirrel and other smaller animals of the rodent family. *Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim*. . . The Dudum Falls were drumming away in the background as the men set the net in which the squirrel would be caught. Four men stood as guards behind the net while the others encircled the bush facing it. Dogs were set on animals' tracks. Though most squirrels in the area were tree-squirrels, occasionally one found squirrels that had come right down to the ground. The hunters blew their bugles, and others beat the bush. Clubs and stones were hurled onto the tops of trees, and small tree branches with countless leaves were ripped off and sent flying to the ground. One of the stones landed on a squirrel's hoard of nuts and scattered them all over the place, but there was no squirrel in sight. The hunters clapped and yelled. The dogs, bedecked with bells fastened around their necks with a leather band, barked. But no squirrel appeared. The hunters untied the net and changed site.

When they had set the net in order, they repeated the noisy process. It was well that they did so, for their efforts were rewarded. A furry-tailed squirrel, its mouth stuffed with palm nuts, was seen gliding on the midrib of a frond. On seeing it, the people below redoubled their noise. The air itself vibrated with the uproar. The squirrel leaped from a palm-tree on to another tree, darting from branch to branch in the direction of the net. The organizing party was thrilled. Occasionally the squirrel would halt and listen, as if to a secret command, then continued, twitching its tail now and again, halted once more and nearly turned round in retreat. But the coaxing from below and the directing sticks and stones steered it in the right direction.

When it was near enough to the net, the leader of the hunt, Abaago, came out to address the animal. First he invoked the ancestral spirits of their village to come to their aid. Then he proceeded to address the squirrel in the ceremonial incantation:

‘Age-honoured Squirrel, come to our help. Come to the help of the people of Akan. We appeal to you in the name of Ngiekum. Squirrel, if the piece of land in dispute belongs to us as we firmly believe that it does, Squirrel, die and remain in the net. If, on the other hand, the entire plot does not belong to us as Anjong claims, Squirrel, go in and escape from the net. My words are ended. I have no more to say,’ he ended, and the efforts to goad the squirrel into the net were intensified.

Finally the squirrel dived into the net and shook it as it was caught up in the meshes. The guardians quickly rushed to close in on the animal. Then to the dismay of the Akan people, the squirrel, as if by a miraculous tour de force, extricated itself from the intricate network and mysteriously vanished from sight. There were sighs of disappointment from the Akan people but there were those of relief from the people of Anjong. The whole tedious process was once more carried out.

But it was all in vain. No beating of the bush, no yelling nor screeching yielded a squirrel. They changed sites several times, but they still did not find any squirrel. Then, very late in the afternoon, when they had exhausted themselves and were just about giving up the exercise, they spotted an intractable squirrel whose movement they never succeeded in diverting in the direction of the net. The squirrel later on disappeared. It was with dampened spirits that the Akan people, with lowered heads, trudged home that evening. The news of the bootless hunt was received in Anjong with quiet optimism. Just a cautious upbeat mood because, until they themselves justified their own claim, it was not yet clear who was in the right.

Anjong sent word to Akan that their own hunt would take place the following *Ichong*. On that day the two teams were once more at Iteubugi. *Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim-Dim...* The Dudum Falls were, as usual, humming away not far away. The net was spread out with its corners tied to stakes. It did not take a long time for the usual clamour to produce a squirrel. It was steered towards the net.

Ubeno, the head of the Anjong team, went forward and solemnly addressed the animal after due invocation of the ancestral spirits:

‘Squirrel, you are the last word when all else fails. You the impartial judge that has passed judgement over countless cases since the days of Ngiekum. Squirrel, come to the help of Anjong. If the whole of Ukob belongs to Akan, Squirrel, go in and disappear from the net. But if the Anjong side belongs to Anjong and the Akan side to Akan, then die and remain in the net, Squirrel. I have spoken for all Anjong.’

When he had ended the ceremonial appeal, the commotion intensified and the frightened animal, finding itself hemmed in on all sides, dived into the net, nearly tearing it. It was a big and strong squirrel. It shook the net vigorously, but the more it attempted to escape, the more it got itself entangled in the net. It had folded the net round itself several times. There were triumphant shouts from the guardians who carried the bundled net with the Squirrel in it in their hands. Anjong hunters screamed for joy, and two gun shots were fired into the air.

‘Have you seen? Akan have you seen what the Squirrel has done? Have you seen the Squirrel in the net?’ asked the excited Ubeno.

‘From today be careful as you interfere with our farm,’ said a hunter from Anjong. ‘The Squirrel that all of us revere has proved us right and you wrong.’

‘Any more trespass on our farm would not only be an insult to the venerable judge of the land, but also a defiance of the decision of our patriarch. For what the Squirrel says is also confirmed by the earth in which Ngiekum is buried,’ said a second hunter.

‘And we shall counter any such move with a clean conscience,’ put in a third.

‘Wizards that some of you are. You have caught nothing yet,’ sneered an Akan man. ‘You have caught a false squirrel. That’s no squirrel. Who does not know the power of your wizardry. Who does not know that some of you can take the form and shape of any animal if he likes? You have proved nothing. That’s not a genuine squirrel.’

‘I’m only surprised that Akan failed to produce their own fake squirrel. For are there not more wizards and even witches in Akan than in Anjong?’ asked Ubeno.

‘Perhaps we bought our own wizards from the market of the spirits,’ added an Anjong hunter. ‘Go there and buy yours. When you’ve done so, bring us a live squirrel, any live squirrel, fake or genuine. We shall accept it.’

‘Let all this noise stop,’ Ubeno intervened. ‘Let us all go home for the rest of the ceremony.’

‘What ceremony? Dog ceremony. No Akan man will be present at such a mockery of justice,’ said Abaago, the leader of the Akan team.

‘Was there anyone even thinking of such a thing?’ asked another Akan man. ‘Not the son of Anjiayong.’

With that he strode forward followed by the rest of his teammates. So the two teams separated and returned home, with some Anjong hunters jeering at the defeated party. Thus the demoralized Akan refused to honour the rest of the squirrel-hunt ceremony purely out of shame and injured pride. Before the Anjong hunters got home, those at home had known that Anjong had won the case. The gunshots fired at Iteubugi had been heard and the message quickly spread through most of Anjong and all of Akan, for the hunting ground was nearer Akan than Anjong. Since Akan failed to turn up, only Anjong members of the hunt participated in the celebration that took place in Akaya’s palace. The people ate, drank, danced and fired gunshots.

In the evening of that day, when most men and women had come back from their raffia groves and farms, Akaya ordered his *chinda*, Nyamasi, to go on to the *ndek* and communicate a message to the villages of Dudum. Nyamasi got the two beating bamboo sticks, held one in each hand and examined them, and adjusted his seat: *Kíng Kòng - Kíng Kòng - Kíng Kòng*. He gave six signal beats at the end of which he told the chief that he was ready. The initial notes helped to put the population on their guard. Conversations were instantly suspended. People raised their heads to listen in anxious expectation; it was not a common practice to hear the booming sound of the chief’s *ndek*. It always communicated information of a solemn nature: either an obituary, or news that concerned all the villages. So all listeners pricked their ears to pick up what news was about to break out.

Akaya dictated his prepared speech from memory, and Nyamasi translated it instantly into the complicated drum sounds.

'Villages of Dudum, Akaya salutes you ... The good piece of news from Anjong is that we have been vindicated in our claim to our own portion of Ukob ... Anjong has caught its Squirrel concerning the disputed land ... This is a clear proof that that portion of Ukob is ours ... Unfortunately Akan refused to be present at the final ceremony as tradition requires ... But we performed it without them all the same ... They were, however, present at the most important part of it: the scene where the Squirrel was caught at Iteubugi under their own eyes... I hope this is the end of this troublesome land dispute ... The Squirrel, the age-honoured judge, has settled our dispute once and for all ... Anyone who makes the mistake of resurrecting this problem will undoubtedly be incurring the anger of the earth god including that of Ngiekum ... I would like the chiefs of Achang, Azem, Afed, Tin and Ebang to be present in my palace tomorrow *Unoh*, by the time the morning raffia tappers are returning from their groves... All Upper Dudum people should desist from any insulting comments or cynical remarks made at the expense of the Akan people... Ultimately, the mighty Nyuikoh up in the sky is on our side... I wish you good night.'

The message sparked off spirited discussions in several homes. It was received in Akan with cynicism. Arrogant fellows like Abaago spoke with contempt of the idea of a squirrel and still belittled the matter. In some houses the adults were invaded by their children asking for interpretation of the drum message. Some parents interpreted it, while others were rather angered. One of the parents who picked a bone with his son over the issue was Ekunidi. At the end of Akaya's message, Eziaga complained to his father that he had understood only the mention of the names of Anjong and Akan but could not make any sense of the rest of the sounds that resounded in the distance with thundering echoes. The calling sounds for the names of some villages were simple enough. Even the names of people were simple to call over the drum. Anyone but a little child could call or understand the calling of his or her own name or that of any next-of-kin.

'Why should I interpret what the *ndek* has said? Is the *ndek* of any importance to young people?' barked Ekunidi.

‘Don’t be angry, father. I didn’t mean to anger you. I heard the names of Anjong and Akan.’

‘And then what?’

‘I didn’t understand the rest of the message.’

‘How many times must I keep on interpreting drum messages for you? Have I not been telling you to learn the calling drum? Who will translate your drum messages when I am no more?’

‘Just tell me what the message means.’

‘I say go and ask the drum.’

But when Ekunidi had calmed down, he told his son what the message was about. Parents like Ekunidi often lamented the fact that their children manifested a loss of interest in the ways of the clan. They complained that children no longer catered for chickens as they themselves had done when they were children. Children did not care to learn to play or interpret the calling drum. They were indifferent to masked dances. Schools and churches in the clan had brought about these changes. But some young people did feel the gradual disappearance of some of the cultural practices. There were talks, among the intellectual elite, of a cultural revival: an attempt at the restoration of some of the cultural values of their clan’s past.

The talking drum was highly valued in the days of the Tiba wars of expansion and German expeditions. Most villages of Dudum were perched by the hillsides or sometimes on the top of a hill so as to easily detect the approach of the enemies. When the invader was in sight, the drummer would send swift drum signals which were picked up by other drummers and, within seconds, the whole area was already alerted. But those barbarous wars and senseless raids had ended.

The villages had been encouraged to resettle in the valleys, and a few roads were constructed to break through communication barriers. Some of the drums were now rotting away on the hillsides. To the young people the importance of the drum now lay largely in dancing. Any attempt to push them to master the language of the talking drum would be comparable to, in the words of a Dudum proverb, tying firewood on the back of a dog. The effect of such an activity would be clumsiness of performance or behaviour on the part of either the youths or the dog. Nevertheless, it was not an impossible task, but the future was not in its favour.

Chapter Seven

Echunjei was at home during the Easter holidays. Although she was still lanky, her increasing beauty made her the pride of her parents, especially Ebito. Ekunidi, on hearing that she was at home, paid another visit to his in-laws. Akaya had earlier interviewed his daughter on her alleged unfriendly attitude towards her betrothed. Echunjei replied that she was still in school; so she could not marry before completing her course. She added that only after completion would she then decide whether she would marry Eziaga or not. Akaya was disturbed and slightly angry. He, however, mastered his emotions and gave up any attempt at scolding his daughter. Echunjei was his beloved child, and in college too. That she was in college was already fame she had brought not only to her family, but to the entire Anjong. He would not destroy this fame overnight by pulling her away from college.

Ekunidi, on the other hand, shared the anxiety of his son. They might be looking at water on cocoyam leaves. Echunjei might complete her course and refuse to marry Eziaga. After carefully examining and analyzing the implications of Echunjei's being in college while he himself did not go beyond the primary school, Eziaga asked his father to present Akaya with two hard alternatives: either Echunjei should quit school and marry him then, or the dowry so far spent on her be refunded immediately. Ekunidi, out of respect for the chief, played down the mandatory tone of his son's demands. Akaya was in a dilemma. These were really hard choices for him since he could not choose any without risking one thing or the other. He had taken an active part in advocating girls' education; he would therefore be defeating his own purpose if he should terminate Echunjei's course prematurely.

The other choice was equally vexing. True, Ekunidi was his subject, but because of their 'friendship' he had become much more than a mere subject; Ekunidi was like a family member. Both had been fond of each other, and their relationship was further strengthened by the projected marriage of their children. How could

such a relationship that had grown over the years be undermined? The mistake Akaya had made, like any Dudum father, was that of having betrothed his daughter at a tender age. Nevertheless, Akaya found a more honourable way out of this dilemma: he had more daughters younger than Echunjei, so Ekundidi might then choose from the unbetrothed ones a girl who would replace Echunjei for his son. Eziaga would only need to wait for a few more years, and his wife would be ready. In that way the friendship between Akaya and Ekunidi would be maintained.

Much as he naturally sympathized with his son, after some reflection, Ekunidi arrived at the conclusion that circumstances had connived, so to speak, to impose a challenging problem on the chief. The solution, he thought, was, nevertheless, satisfactory. Had his in-law not been Chief Akaya, the situation might have been different. Ekunidi would most certainly have been more authoritative and insistent. But with Akaya it was different: Akaya was, first, his ruler before being his in-law. Ekunidi gave his consent and left the palace.

But Eziaga was shocked when his father spoke to him about the compromise. How could his father be so unreasonable as to accept such a humiliating option? Who did his father and the chief take him to be? Indeed, it was a noisy scene in which father and son strove to out-reason each other.

‘The chief still has a handful of other daughters, my son.’

‘And so what?’

‘Well, we can choose another one in the place of Echunjei..’

‘For you or me?’

‘For you. You don’t expect that at my age I should still be running after little girls, do you?’

‘Why not? Nothing prevents you from doing that. If you can choose a baby for me, by the time I marry her I should be of your age. So it makes no difference, you see. Go ahead and marry one of your friend’s daughters. As for me, forget about me.’

‘But think of Ujakwe, son. Ujakwe is nearly as old as Echunjei herself. She will make a better choice. What do you think of her?’

‘Excellent. What else should I say? Since I was marked out for little girls what else should I say?’

‘She’s almost a woman, son. You ignore the way girls grow nowadays. She should be an expectant mother in a year’s time.’

'Oh yes, no doubt. I thought you'd rejected the possibility. So you were merely joking after all.'

'Don't anger me, Eziaga. I can sacrifice all that I've spent on Echunjei if you tease me further. Don't joke with me.'

'Well, father it makes little difference to me. The choice was after all yours. I didn't have a say in Echunjei's affair. Now grant me one favour. Let me look for a girl myself since your choice hasn't worked.'

'Is there anything better that you could have asked me? I grant you the favour willingly. This is just what I've been asking you to do. Choose Ujakwe.'

'No, father. The woman market is not yet exhausted. There are many and perhaps better girls than your friend's.'

'What? And what will happen to the dowry already spent on Echunjei?'

'You'll ask for it to be refunded. You began the matter, so end it yourself.'

'Don't let me touch you with my hands, Eziaga. My hands begin to itch.'

'You can do what you like, father. Do you want me to be the laughing stock of my friends? What will they say when they hear that I've been flouted by a girl only to settle for an inferior one? And from the same family! No. I'd rather endure the pain of your blow than stand such indignity. I mean it. I cannot marry Ujakwe at all.'

Thus father and son separated, each in a rage. Eziaga's reference to self-respect touched, however lightly, a soft spot in his father's heart. But if it did so, Ekunidi never showed it. He managed to stifle that emotion and left his son implacably unyielding.

While Ekunidi and his son did not see eye to eye, another father and son, this time in Akan, seemed to hit it off well. Embuta was pleased that Achamba was around. In one sense it was almost like the Ekunidi/Eziaga confrontation with the difference that flaring tempers were absent. Achamba would not accept a choice imposed on him by his father, and the tolerant father gave him liberty, provided he did not postpone marrying. Embuta saw no reason for Achamba delaying; he had finished schooling and was working. It was better for him to have his own house managed by a woman rather than

wasting money on so-called houseboys. Besides, how long was Embuta going to live? The fear of dying without a grandson haunted him like a nightmare. But Achamba assured his father that he would soon make his choice known to him.

A young man close to thirty Achamba was tall, slightly slender and handsome. Born with a chocolate-coloured complexion he had rich, thick hair which, while in the university, he used to blow up in the then fashionable 'afro' style. But now, with 'afro' on the decline, he had since brought discipline to bear on his hair, cutting it reasonably low enough.

A dashing gentleman with a certain romantic air about him, Achamba was a dandy, always smartly dressed. A lover of blue jeans with white or brown tennis shoes and white socks, he could occasionally be seen in a brown or dark leather jacket over a white shirt with a stiff collar. His wardrobe contained well-tailored suits for special occasions.

After successfully obtaining an honours degree in English from the University of Yaoundé, he was recruited and posted to teach English and Literature in GHS Mbambe. A voracious reader in English Literature he also loved *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines which he received regularly, being a subscriber to both.

His favourite radio station was the Voice of America (V.O.A); more often than not his radio was tuned to this domineering, powerful station. In matters of music Achamba preferred music from Zaire, and black American disco, in that order. With a booming voice Achamba was soft-spoken and very articulate. A man of emotional stability he was often unflappable, even in moments of crises.

For all his Western education, or because of it, Achamba remained conscious of his cultural roots. He was every inch a Dudum son, in the only sense that a 'modern' Cameroonian young man with multiple Western influences on him could be generally said to be modern as well as traditional.

Achamba had had a careful survey of all girls of marriageable age in Akan and Anjong, particularly those in higher classes in the primary schools and the few in secondary schools. He had himself informed of all Dudum girls in the coastal areas of the South-West Province, but could not find a suitable wife. One major reason was

the fact that most of the nubile girls had been betrothed already. At one point he nearly fell into the temptation of marrying outside the clan, for he had known some non-Dudum girls. He, however, soon gave up that possibility because he feared that his father would hardly survive the shock of his marrying a foreigner. Now the question of looking for a wife from his clan loomed larger on his mind than ever.

The Dudum have a saying that a good plum is often located on a risky branch. Of the pictures of girls that fleetingly went through his mind, if there was one which seemed to linger there for a good while, it was the picture of Akaya's daughter. She was no doubt the most highly educated from the area, but the fact that she herself was traditionally engaged to Eziaga disqualified her as Achamba's possible choice. Despite her slightly skinny nature, Echunjei's general shape and education had a magnetic appeal for Achamba. That was why, despite the remoteness of the possibility, she still lingered behind his mind as a choice.

He had met Echunjei before, but they had never said anything to each other beyond casual hand shaking and banal pleasantries. The first time was in Anjong market when she was in the company of four other girls. The other time was at a students' meeting in Anjong school hall. He nearly danced with her on that day but for the unintentional intervention of some boys who kept her constantly occupied for most of the evening. Had he insisted, he might have succeeded anyway, but he did not want to betray his feelings for her. Besides, Echunjei was still relatively young at that time, and Achamba did not know how she would interpret his behaviour.

He and three other young men stopped at Back-to-Land off-licence bar on their way to Anjong market. Back-to-Land was the most interesting drinking spot at Nyeba. There, gossip and scandal were embellished and retailed. A Land rover which had just come down from town was being unloaded nearby. Bags of salt, cement and aluminium sheets were the main things it had brought from Nkoman. At the front of the bar were local women and children dressed in colourful *Cicam* material. Some had brought plastic

containers, jerry cans and bottles to buy kerosene from the bartender. Others were there simply out of curiosity, to stare at the Land rover and its passengers. There was music from the bar.

Except for a few bamboo benches placed end to end along the walls so that the main floor was clear of chairs, there were no comfortable seats. Some customers were already seated with bottles of beer in front of them. To the left near the main entrance stood the counter below which were bottles of '33' Stout, 'Special', Top Citron, Fanta and Orange while behind the counter near the wall was an old dusty record-player which still performed its duty tolerably well.

When Achamba got in, a few customers were dancing to the tune of *makossa*. It was a bright day, and the sun was getting a little too hot; the air inside was stifling. Perspiration from sweating dancers, puffs from cheap cigarettes, and that irritating and pungent smell from the clay pipes of the local men and women formed a mixture that assaulted customers' noses.

The new arrivals went around and shook hands with acquaintances before ordering themselves drinks. As Achamba and his friends sipped their drinks, more and more customers came in, and the empty seats were gradually taken up until only a few of them remained. The customers became more lively and talkative after the alcohol had coursed through their veins and warmed their spirits. They chatted in groups or laughed across the floor; some ignored the music completely while others tried to appreciate both the conversation and music at the same time. No one cared about the stuffiness of the bar any longer. Indeed, the dancing, drinking and animated discussions rendered the pub a home of happy men, the centre of conviviality.

It was in the midst of this gaiety that Achamba overheard some people talking about Eziaga and Echunjei. He pricked up his ears. The two men entertaining the group seemed to disagree. One insisted that it was Eziaga who had insulted Echunjei and her family. The other strongly refuted this, stressing instead that it was Echunjei who had ruined Eziaga's plans concerning their marriage. According to the former speaker, Eziaga had rushed to the palace, a machete in hand, swearing to bring down Echunjei and mother in a bunch unless his money was refunded. This allegation was challenged by

the other speaker who insisted that Echunjei had openly called Eziaga an illiterate idiot. Thus rose and fell rumours about the latest love scandal which, until now, had not got to Achamba's ears. Achamba gulped down a glass of beer and filled his cup again. He had totally ignored the conversation of his own group. His companions who had noticed this asked him what it was that drew his attention from them.

'They say that Eziaga will no longer marry Echunjei.'

'For what reason?' asked one friend.

'I don't know. The two men telling the story seemed to be arguing over the real cause of the break-up.'

'Who but a blind man could doubt the reason for it?' put in the other friend. 'I have always said that marriage would never work between Eziaga and Echunjei. At least not so long as the girl continues to attend college. I've known a few college girls in Bamenda and Kumba who have refused their future husbands as soon as they entered college and their boys did not.'

At this point a fellow, Emburacho of Tin, entered the bar. He appeared as drunk as ever and, characteristically, pushed his way rudely through the group standing near the door. Emburacho forced himself into a tiny empty space on the bench, cursing the people between whom he sat for not helping him. He noisily ordered a beer and, after drinking it, surveyed with a squinting eye, those seated. He carried his fez-cap jauntily, and espied Achamba whom he greeted at the top of his voice. Achamba was visibly displeased and embarrassed, but he managed to remain calm and politely returned his greeting. Achamba was used to Emburacho and his odd ways. They had been primary school mates though Emburacho did not go beyond Class Four. After guzzling his remaining beer, he turned to the person next to him, whom he had first of all insulted, and asked him to buy him a beer. The fellow who could barely afford his own beer asked Emburacho whether he was making a mockery of him.

'What mockery? Are you a child? Can't you buy me a common beer?'

'I've spent all that I had on this bottle, and there's nothing more left.'

‘Liar. You keep on hoarding money which will go down into your grave with you. Who doesn’t know how miserly you are?’

‘What have I done to deserve this insult, Emburacho? Know the kind of person to joke with when you’re drunk.’

‘Be quiet, wretch. Clear away from my face, fowl dropping. I can give you five bottles of beer. Let me give you five beers now.’

‘Millionaire, keep your beer to yourself. Mine is enough.’

Emburacho’s quarrelsome tone had attracted the rest of the customers, some of whom were clearly wishing for a fight between the two men. But they were disappointed because Ayong, for that was the victim of Emburacho’s incivility, stood up and walked out, uttering no more words than were necessary to a fool. Achamba, sensing that he might be the next target, persuaded his friends to drink quickly. They soon emptied their glasses and were moving out. But they had scarcely gone down the door steps when they heard Emburacho shouting Achamba’s name. They ignored the fool and continued to the market.

‘Emburacho hasn’t yet met the person who will remove his front teeth,’ said Abongya.

‘It won’t be me, I assure you,’ put in Achamba.

‘But were you ever dreaming of fighting him? Then you’re worse than a mad man.’

They arrived in the market. Though he had left the house for the market without any clear motive, the information he had come across in Back-to-Land made it almost imperative for Achamba to meet and possibly know Echunjei’s opinion on the issue. But search as he could, he did not find Echunjei in the market. He walked absent-mindedly among his friends, and was not happy whenever they suggested sitting in one of the drinking houses surrounding the market. Cunningly, he succeeded in getting information that she had not come to the market.

Chapter Eight

A week had passed since Achamba returned from Anjong. He went to Akan market but did not find Echunjei there. Not that he expected to find her though. She rarely went to Akan market. Achamba knew he would have to wait for another week before going back to Anjong where he might be lucky to meet her. In a town it might have been different. There were often interesting situations that might thrust this or that person in your way. But in a rural community like Dudum, people met their distant friends and relatives only on two key market days. Thus most important appointments were arranged to coincide with either Anjong or Akan market days.

This aspect of village life would bore someone used to town life. You led a monotonous life until the village market day arrived to bring in some freshness. Then, you had a chance of meeting new faces. The usual bustle in the market, the colourful display of wares, the casual walk that now took you to a raffia-wine pub, now to a beer house, the variety of interesting human characters you met, all of these brightened your spirit. And when you returned home in the evening, it was with regret that the day had gone by so fast, and a wish that the following week would not be long in coming.

At last Achamba was once more in Anjong market. Though he was almost lost in the usual business of handshaking, he was on the lookout for the one person who had made him come to the market. He had vowed not to be befuddled by drink that day. Despite the pressure from his friends, he succeeded in taking just a little raffia wine to leave his mind at its normal state. They were in Martha's *Mbub House*, the best in the market. The wine was so sweet and palatable that two large jugs of it had nearly been consumed within a short time. And there was no more sitting space on the bamboo benches. People strolled in and out of the bar. A seat in

this bar at such an hour was very expensive. No one paid attention to the record-player that was doling out a handful of popular songs.

Achamba yielded his seat to one of the young men with no place to sit. The fellow was very grateful. Achamba had seen Echunjei at a distance, through the window. She was in the company of three other girls. His heart gave three or four quick bounds as he stood up and got out of the bar. He edged his way through the crowded market and met with the group, as casually as possible. Though he was very anxious, he was calm, but his grip carried enough warmth to tell the girls that he was interested in them. After being told by Echunjei who her companions were, he asked them a few questions about the market. Then turning to Echunjei he inquired about her studies.

‘Studies are very difficult,’ she said.

‘But I hope you’re doing your best all the same.’

‘Well, I’m barely trying.’

‘That’s good. How do you find the village after school?’

‘Work. There’s a lot of work at home. We’re always in the farm.’

‘It’s not bad, you know. Your mother should be grateful to you for that. I hope she gives you enough time for revision of your work.’

‘Oh yes, there is time, but what can you do in a big compound like ours. There are always children and visitors around to interrupt one’s concentration.’

‘I guess you’ll have to work harder when you get back to school.’

‘I hope so.’

‘What about sharing a drink with me? Let me offer you girls a drink in that off-licence.’

‘No, thank you. I’ll soon be returning home. There’s some work my mother has left in the house for me.’

Then the two friends who had temporarily left them to buy some garden eggs joined them again. The fruit looked so fresh and succulent that Achamba was tempted to thrust his hand into their basket and take out two. He made a pretended apology for his rudeness, but the girls returned the joke good-humouredly, saying there was a crab in their basket that would bite the hand of an intruder. Achamba once more shook hands with all the girls, and they departed.

He was fully satisfied with the encounter even though it was brief. True, Echunjei did not return his grip with as much warmth, but she was not cold towards him either, at least not visibly. Achamba was experienced enough not to let that worry him. The first encounter with some girls was like that. Had she accepted his invitation for a drink, he might have had a chance of a longer discussion, but as she did not, that opportunity was put off. He had chosen the questions put to her very carefully, and purposely avoided the sensitive issue of her match. It would have been bad taste had he introduced the topic. She would probably have been embarrassed. No, he could not have done that.

But it was already common talk now that Echunjei had refused to marry Eziaga. Achamba no longer doubted that. As she moved about in the market, Echunjei was aware of the fact that she was the subject of discussion in many corners. Relatives of Eziaga kept an unfriendly eye on any boy who entered into conversation with her. Such was the case when Achamba was conversing with her. They had been closely watched by Eziaga's relatives and others. Achamba, who was unaware of the magnitude of the meeting, suspected little and went about in the market with an untroubled conscience. He was in high spirits and more generous when he stopped at Back-to-Land on his way home. He offered drinks to a few friends and relatives and bought himself a beer. The bar was very full now. People had sold their wares and were ready to give away nearly all the money for a beer or more. After taking swigs at their bottles of beer, the revellers held them above their heads and danced drunkenly. Emburacho was dead drunk and staggered about in front of the bar distributing obscenities and insults to unprovoked drunks and onlookers. Achamba easily avoided the uncivil drunk in the huge crowd, being helped by the approaching darkness.

When he got home, he passed a bundle of groundnuts on to his parents. He had bought them himself, but when asked who had given him the groundnuts, he gave them the impression that they were given by a girlfriend. That was significant: it tied in well with his plan to pacify his father that he would soon marry. A single progressive young man in Achamba's situation was often the target of many marriageable girls and would-be mothers-in-law whose daughters were not yet betrothed. Minor but significant gifts such

as groundnuts, cashew-nuts and kola-nuts from a girl to a boy were symbols of admiration or love, and the first step towards drawing two young people together. As Achamba's parents ate the groundnuts, they expressed the wish that the giver would soon be known; Embuta actually poured wine into his ancestral hole to seek the blessing of his venerable dead.

Meanwhile as Echunjei got home, her mother summoned her to her room. Since the rumoured rupture of the match, Ebito had not yet discussed the matter in detail with her daughter. The issue worried her very much because she found Eziaga very kind and helpful. He had helped her to harvest her palm nuts and to build her farm hut. She also had received many presents from him. She had assured him that Echunjei would be his wife and that, as far as she was concerned, Eziaga should entertain no fears. Now Ebito could not understand the behaviour of her daughter. That afternoon in the market when she saw Achamba conversing with Echunjei, Ebito could not help suspecting, like many others, that that was Eziaga's rival. She was straightforward with her daughter and expected the same candidness from her.

'Tell me everything,' she said. 'Tell me who's turning your head from Eziaga.'

'There isn't anyone turning my head, mother,' replied Echunjei. 'I know of no one.'

'Why then have you become cold towards your fiancé? Why then have you told your father to be careful as he takes money from Ekunidi's family.'

'Well, I said that my education still preoccupies me now more than marriage.'

'My dear daughter, you ought to know that we don't talk with book but with a person, a human being. We can converse only with a child. What's important for a woman is a child.'

'But I don't deny that. You're right. I didn't tell you that I hated being a mother. I'd like to have children when the time comes.'

'Assure me at least, my child, that you'll come to marry no one else but Eziaga.'

'I hesitate to make such a promise. I can't promise you before the time is ripe.'

'Think of the service this boy has rendered me and your family as a whole, Echunjei. Think of the help he's given you since you entered college long ago. Eziaga may do something bad if he's disappointed.'

'Let me complete my course then I'll decide. That's what I told my father.'

'By the way who was the boy with whom you were conversing in the market?'

'I can hardly tell which particular person I spoke to. We were in a group.'

'I mean that young man who wore a red shirt. The tall black boy you stood with near Apollo's bar.'

'Oh yes, that was Mr. Achamba of Akan.'

'What does he do?'

'He's a teacher in the college at Mbambe.'

'What was he telling you for all that long time you stood talking? Tell me everything. Don't withhold anything from me.'

'Nothing special, really. He asked me about my holidays and studies.'

'He didn't mention anything about Eziaga?'

'Honestly speaking, mother, he didn't.'

'Good. Go away. If you're a good girl who listens to what comes out of her mother's mouth, put what I've told you in your head. Never disappoint Eziaga.'

As she left her mother's house, Echunjei felt sorry for her. She was sure that her mother would be disappointed in her in the future. They would have to go a long way before arriving at a compromise. On the other hand, Echunjei was more confident in her father who was more objective and understanding. Despite the consolation of finding some protection in her father, Echunjei still wished her mother were more tolerant towards her now.

From childhood the parent who had shown more tenderness towards her had been her mother. Those little but cherished acts of love from her had been indelibly stamped in Echunjei's mind. She now regretted the ironical turn of things, and heartily hoped that the future would provide them an acceptable solution to the marriage issue. A few years ago, no one would have envisaged this strained relationship, so to speak, between mother and daughter. At that

time Echunjei was still an uninformed primary school girl, very much attached to her mother.

But things did not remain the same when she went to college. A world of new ideas was open to her. She now came into contact with a variety of girls with different ideas about marriage. Debates and the reading of all sorts of women's magazines influenced Echunjei's ideas about love and marriage. It was not therefore to be supposed that an impressionable girl so exposed to such influences would remain unaffected.

Although Echunjei and Eziaga had never exhibited equal passion towards each other in the primary school, her entry into college marked the beginning of the cooling off, on her part, of any little interest which she still had for him. With the modification of her philosophy of marriage, she concluded that the choice her parents had made for her was the wrong one. Some of the qualities she expected to find in her future husband were the stereotyped favourites of most girls: handsomeness, wealth, a good height and so on, qualities lamentably lacking in Eziaga. Thus in her mind Echunjei said goodbye to Eziaga as soon as she had assimilated a good deal of these new ideas.

Echunjei never passed harsh judgement on her mother's conservatism. She was rather sympathetic towards her. Unlike Echunjei she had not been to school, and no one expected an illiterate woman to be a prodigy of new ideas such as were the exclusive rights of a favoured few. Ebito's main wish in life was that of most mothers in Dudum, the overruling passion of having her daughters happily married to rich and generous men. It would be erroneous, however, to suppose that this attitude was wholly mercenary. To Ebito, Eziaga was the best boy a girl could aspire to marry. He was rich, handsome and generous. The difference in educational levels between the couple was not significant to her. They were in her view 'book people'. And as it was not common to find both wealth and generosity combined in a single young man, she reasoned, it would be most prudent for her daughter not to throw away the rare opportunity within her grasp.

Though Ebito was already aware of Akaya's stand on the marriage issue, she wanted to see what persuasion could do. Akaya had not yet released a word to his wife about the compromise he

and Ekunidi had arrived at. And when he did, it made a terrible impression on her. Ebito received it as though it was a thunderbolt. It left her with all the shock and embarrassment that come with unexpectedness.

In short, Ebito was scandalized and outraged.

‘What compromise? What do you mean?’

‘I mean that I have other daughters.’

‘And so what?’

‘So Ekunidi could choose another in the place of Echunjei.’

‘Whose daughter? The child of which woman?’

‘It doesn’t matter which woman’s daughter she may be. My children are my daughters. I’m their sole father.’

‘Owner of daughters! I see. So I’ll be deprived of my in-law because you have other daughters,’ protested Ebito.

‘When have hens begun to crow in this village?’ asked Akaya proverbially.

‘So, according to you, hens have no feelings, eh? Hens lay the eggs and incubate them. But when they are hatched the cocks lay claim to all the chicks, right?’ replied Ebito in the same proverbial vein.

‘When did women start growing a beard in this clan? Woman, wait until hens begin to crow here. When that time comes, then we can hear your voice. Until then, however, ours is still a society where men make major decisions in matters of marriage.’

But Ebito would not give up the verbal duel yet.

‘Where were your daughters when you betrothed my child to Eziaga?’

‘Ebito, are your ears sealed with wax? How else can I make it clear to you that you have no say in this affair? Giving a girl into marriage is not the business of a woman. It’s a man’s responsibility. Do you hear me? It’s a man’s job. Get back to your house. I say get out of here...’ Akaya got up threateningly to make certain that his order was carried out. The wife quietly withdrew into her house without further protestation, but satisfied, at least, that she had made known her annoyance.

Chapter Nine

The news Achamba had heard was terrible. How could his people have done such a thing? He wondered why the Akan people had carried out such irresponsible acts of vandalism. He had just returned from home three weeks earlier and had barely settled down for the second term's work in his school when he heard that his people had plundered part of Anjong. The ring-leaders of the raid were at the Gendarmerie headquarters in Mbambe, chafing under the restrictions of detention.

While at home, Achamba had had himself briefed on all that had happened between Akan and Anjong. As one of the enlightened sons of the area, he felt it his responsibility to educate and inform his people on government policies on self-reliant development and the peaceful co-existence of all citizens. He had spoken to Chief Umeitoh and Abaago on the necessity of avoiding attracting the vigilant eye of law-enforcement officers by not overstating their case on the land issue since the squirrel was not on their side. Achamba had flattered himself that the land dispute had been resolved.

But the latest scandal was proof that Akan did not attach any importance to his advice. That afternoon after classes, Achamba went to the Gendarmerie Brigade to inquire after the detainees. A group of prisoners was cutting down the tall elephant grass behind the famous cell. He was moving straight towards them when he was stopped by a gendarme officer on patrol:

'Qui êtes-vous Monsieur? et où allez vous ?' barked the officer in French.

Achamba turned and went up to him. He told the gendarme in French that he wanted to speak to some detainees.

'Mais renseignez vous au bureau, Monsieur,' ordered the man. *'Ce n'est pas comme ça que les choses se passent ici. Allez voir le chef au bureau, d'accord?'*

'Oui chef,' replied Achamba.

He went to the office of the Brigade Commander. Not that he needed to be told that he ought to have gone to the office first. Achamba knew that for formal inquiries, he had to consult the head of the Brigade first. However, he was fed up with frequent formalities at the Brigade and for once, he wanted to by-pass strict control since the people he wanted to see were cutting grass not far away from him.

He was given fifteen minutes to converse with the detainees under the watchful eye of another gendarme officer. The latter was from Mbambe, and the implication of Dudum people conversing in the presence of a foreigner who, nevertheless, understood their language was clear: incendiary statements would be suppressed and the discussion of sensitive issues avoided. Achamba thus avoided touching on questions that might incur the anger of the gendarme, and was content with dwelling on such innocent topics as how they felt, how many people had come from home to see them, and how many times they had eaten. The ten Akan prisoners responded very cautiously, for they still smarted from the brutal treatment received from the gendarmes. When the very formal conversation ended, Achamba was dismissed after he had given some money to the group leader. The detainees were to buy food with it. Achamba promised to call on them again.

The detestable presence of a third party prevented Achamba from gathering any substantial facts from the prisoners. Whatever information he had had prior to this meeting was sketchy and contradictory in part, with some versions blown out of proportion by tale-bearers who were not Dudum people and were not even at the scene of action. Hearing them argue over the whole affair in raffia-wine bars in Mbambe, one would swear that they were in Anjong at the time of the invasion.

But there was only one person who gave Achamba a coherent and true account of the events leading to the arrest of the Akan men. That man was a Dudum man, Usonjim of Ebang. He was travelling from Dudum to Nkoman where he intended to buy some aluminium-iron sheets for his house. Mbambe being midway between Dudum and Nkoman, it was not surprising that Usonjim halted there and, on Achamba's insistence, spent a night with him. It was a rare opportunity for Achamba to keep himself posted on all that was happening back home; Usonjim was just willing to do so.

‘It happened a week ago after the Anjong women had gone back to work on their own portion of Ukob. They had planted their crops and safely returned home. But two days later a group of hefty Akan men fully armed with machetes, spears, clubs and even dane guns invaded Abang, that part of Anjong nearest Akan. The Anjong people did not expect such an attack. That afternoon except for the aged and children, most Abang people had gone away, either to their farms or to attend to other businesses.

‘The raiders came like a swarm of locusts, destroying everything in their way, slashing down plantain stems and butchering animals that they found. At their approach children scuttled in disorder; in vain, old men tried to hide from their fury. The attackers got the men and children badly beaten. An old man, who had managed to scramble onto the shed of his *ndek* and tried to send a warning message to the rest of Anjong, was brutally beaten up. They seized his two playing sticks and flung them into the bush. After butting the miserable man, they dragged him roughly on the ground before leaving him helpless. They broke into houses and ransacked them, breaking utensils and making off with portable valuables. While some hacked at goats and pigs and fled with chunks of meat, others actually carried away live animals with them.

‘Though a few young men from Abang were around, they could do very little in the face of such an overwhelming invasion. They put up a token resistance but when they saw that they would be overpowered all the same, they gave up and took to their heels. The Akan men fired their guns at no one in particular, only intending to scare anyone who hoped to stand in their way.

‘By evening drums in Anjong were beating the sad message. The councillors and elders of Upper Dudum were asked to meet the following morning in Chief Akaya’s palace to discuss what measures to take against the unprovoked aggression. It was a long and angry debate, with some people opting for an eye-for-an-eye, while others, among them the Chief and Ndifon, called for calm and suggested the matter be the responsibility of the government. A delegation of three men was dispatched to the gendarmerie. They returned with the red-cap people who passed to Akan to round up the people now in detention here. At home the Anjong people are crying that justice be exercised and the culprits severely punished. Before I left

home, the Akan people had vowed for more trouble if any of their men were beaten to death by the people here.'

'You said no one was killed?'

'No, none. Only some old men who were badly wounded.'

'I'm afraid it could have been worse if the Akan people had been faced with an equally determined and prepared Abang side. More human blood would have been spilled. It was equally fortunate that the Anjong people did not react in the same way later on. I'm afraid of the future of the Dudum people. I wonder where we're headed. I'm sure the administration won't take this lightly. The outcome may be sad, for all I know.'

'The so-called politicians down there are misleading your people, Mr. Achamba. It is the place of enlightened ones like you to advise your people to be more reasonable.'

'What didn't I do when I was at home three weeks ago? I went to the palace and tried to persuade the chief and his councillors to be less hostile. They proved to be more understanding while I was there. But see what they have done now, hardly three weeks after I have left. You're wrong when you associate everyone with what our people are doing down there. Narrow-minded but persuasive and eloquent fellows like Abaago have brainwashed Chief Umeitoh and others.'

'They'll now pay heavily for what they have done,' said Usonjim.

All the time Achamba wondered whether he should not abandon the detainees to reap what they had sown. After all, had he not done his best to advise them against violence? On further reflection, however, he felt that it would be a traitorous act. Perhaps if he had been working in a different town, he might have played a passive role. But here in Mbambe, where he was the most prominent Dudum man, it would be indeed hard for him to desert his people even if they had been his enemies. That would be mean, for it had been his wish to unite the Dudum people. Thus carrying out vengeance against any group of them now would not be helpful to his cause.

The following day Achamba wrote two letters, one to Chief Akaya of Anjong, the other to Echunjei in Nkoman. In the letter to the chief, he expressed regret for what his people had done to Abang and praised the chief's peaceful and mature approach to the differences between the major villages.

That night, Achamba received a delegation of five men from Akan. They must have left Akan when it was already dark because they got to Mbambe very late in the night. They had carefully avoided being seen and had taken obscure footpaths rather than the broader motorable road. They brought with them three goats, two tins of palm oil and two cocks. Achamba was at a loss for words when he saw the men and their curious wares. What did all that mean? He thought it was food for their detained kinsmen. One of the visitors brought out a letter from his raffia bag and handed it to Achamba. It was from Chief Umeitoh and, in it, Achamba was asked in the name of all Akan people to do all in his power to ensure the good treatment of their kinsmen and their speedy release. He was son of the soil and could not disappoint his people at that critical time. True, he was not the authority that kept the prisoners, but no one was better placed than he in Mbambe to speak for them, especially as he could speak both English and French. The Akan people, the letter said, were not sending him to see the authorities empty-handed. There was something for the big man at the station.

Those were the things the people had brought, a real embarrassment to Achamba. He clearly saw that he was faced with a case of corruption. That was naked corruption. He who had nourished hopes of being above group loyalties. He who had regarded himself as one working for the unity of Dudum was now confronted with the option of clearly taking sides with one party against the other. How could he influence the authorities to favour his headstrong people against the generally peace-loving people of Anjong? Achamba had a troubled sleep that night.

The next day when he read the letter once more, he realized that he was not ordered to influence the administration to give the disputed land to Akan. He was only to bribe the District Officer so that the Akan detainees might be well-treated and soon released. Achamba was relieved. In the evening under the usual cover of darkness, he and the Akan men went to see the D.O. with the gifts. The D.O., Mr. Rex Mokoli, addressed them in very harsh terms, saying the Dudum people were the most difficult he had met in his entire administrative career. And he condemned Akan's recent poor conduct.

The D.O. did not know that the people had brought him some presents. But the visitors had left the things with the houseboy outside, who then took them to one of the stores in the big compound. The men could not have taken them directly to the D.O. When they left, the houseboy showed the things to his boss. The latter ordered the gendarmes to relax their grip on the Akan prisoners, and they did. Thus when Achamba visited the detainees five days later, he too noticed a change. Though they still looked lean and worn out, they told him they were better treated than when they had just arrived. Achamba took advantage of the fact that there was no gendarme censoring their conversation. They discussed more serious topics and, in the course of their conversation, the prisoners told him horrible tales of their early days in detention. They were forced to sleep bare bodied on a bare cement floor; they were caned every morning and evening and, at times, asked to stand in casks full of water. They had not been formally questioned since their arrival but had just been dumped into the dark rooms.

‘We’ve been staying mostly in the dark,’ said Akaranjoh, ‘and have seen light only when they take us out for a beating up or when there’s some work to be done.’

‘I’ll prefer death to lying on bare cement with nothing on,’ put in Enguri. ‘One of the worst things that can happen to a man is to sleep on bare cement or stand in a drum full of water.’

‘And then, when in the morning you’re virtually crabbed from cold, those red-cap people finish you off with their iron canes. Our first days here were terrible. Look at the scars all over our skin. But we have been treated better recently. The dangerous man with the face of an owl has not come here for three days now. However, we don’t know how long we will remain here or whether the harsh treatment will return.’

That was why the Akan people at home had written to Achamba. They feared their kinsmen might be in for an indefinite length of time. One could cite many other people who had died in the cell at Mbambe.

Chapter Ten

The atmosphere in Dudum following the arrest of the Akan invaders was very tense. Hardliners from Anjong who had failed to have war declared against the aggressors were not satisfied with their detention. They thought it was not enough punishment, indeed, only a slight knock on the head of an unruly and provocative neighbour who deserved a harder blow to drive the madness out of his head. So they lobbied for tougher and more effective measures to be taken against the belligerents. Their appeal eventually won general support among the Anjong people, and a meeting to that effect was held in Chief Akaya's palace.

Though there were moderates who countered their efforts, the hardliners finally carried the day. Ubeno was the first speaker:

'Mbe and the Anjong people, I salute you. If I need to remind some of you, we're here today because the over tortured widow has lost her patience. The Akan man has eaten cocoyams until the last raw one is about to lodge in his gullet. The manner in which the last cocoyam will get hooked in his throat is the main aim of our present meeting. Advise who can.'

With that he sat down to the applause of the listeners who had savoured the imagery in his brief speech. When the noise greeting Ubeno's speech died down, someone thrust up his hand, pleading to be heard by waving his forefinger. He was Ekunidi who soon stood up:

'Mbe and Anjong people, I greet you. This meeting, in my view, would not have been necessary if some of you had not obstructed us. We'd wanted stronger action against Akan, but you overruled us, and we're once more gathered here to take decisions which would have been carried out already. If you ask my opinion, I'll simply restate what I'd said in our first meeting: War. Let's carry out a war of righteous vengeance against Akan. Time has proved me right. Open war of retaliation is my only word. Events have vindicated me.'

His speech was greeted with a mixture of approbation and disapproval. Just as his bold approach found satisfaction in some war-mongers' hearts, it sent cold shivers down the spines of their opponents. The next speaker was Atropen, an elderly anti-war man.

'No loving father would put a glowing coal into the palm of his child. But what I see now is an attempt by fathers to put an ember into the palms of their children, not because they aren't aware of its danger but because, very strangely enough, they don't care what happens to their children. Why don't we learn from the past? Fresh are memories of Tiba-Dudum wars and Dudum-German wars. Well, maybe I shouldn't blame you. Most of you never saw these wars. But I did; I took part in them. War is not cocoyam. If you don't know what war is, look at Eguniku in Ebang. Eguniku used to be bubbling with human population. But what remains there today are ruins of war. The Tiba people overran the area and killed everyone, men, women, and children. That is war. You had better know the type of game that has disappeared into a lair before you begin to dig the hole. I'm warding off the rain while the weather is still bright. Let us leave this matter in the hands of government authorities who are already treating the invaders. It should now be clear to the world that the Akan people are the aggressors. Let us leave them to condemn themselves by their own action. Government is not blind. They now know that we are a peaceful people. We shall only be spoiling our case if we now declare open war on Akan at the time our morale is high.'

He sat down and there was total silence, silence that pointed to some sort of embarrassment. Ekunidi promptly stood up to prevent another moderate from blunting the people's will to fight.

'I was nearly sent to sleep by Atropen's recounting of mournful woes. Those stories belong to women; they aren't meant for men. Atropen has a magnificent capacity for facts but has curiously forgotten the accumulated insults heaped on us by Akan. If Atropen would allow Akan to grind pepper on his head, the son of Ekunidi wouldn't do that. I don't think there's another Anjong man that will do so in the light of recent events. Where was Atropen when Akan seized our women's hoes? Where was Atropen when Akan invaded Abang? Was Atropen alive when Anyaporo from Akan told the D.O. there was not a single educated child from Uchei just because he

had wanted an Akan man to take the place reserved for Uchei during the national census? Was Atropen dead when Akan, like the crooks that they are, falsified census figures from their area by inflating their numbers for possible political advantage? Surely Atropen has been blind and deaf to all these happenings in Dudum, else he shouldn't be singing to us now.'

Though Ekunidi's speech was largely a personal attack directed against Atropen, it was resented by few and applauded by many.

'That is the man who will advise his brother to walk over a pit concealing staked spears. He knows there is danger but will still coax him to tread over the covered pit,' said a moderate from somewhere at the back of the assembly.

'Shut your filthy mouth, you coward,' retorted a war-supporter. 'We aren't to be overruled again by your likes.'

At this point the chief thought it appropriate to step in. The meeting risked becoming an affair of nasty exchanges. Akaya stood up and, after adjusting his traditional gown, said:

'Anjong people, I salute you. I thank those who have spoken. They have all spoken very well. To a certain extent I support what each has said. However, I differ with them significantly. Atropen decries outright war and I see with him. Anjong people would agree with me that heads will roll and blood will flow if there's a true war between Anjong and Akan. Indeed we would be spoiling our case. The D.O. at Mbambe wouldn't be happy about it. Some, if not all of us, will be locked up in the cell at Mbambe as it is now the case with our enemies. What would happen to our wives and children would be anyone's guess. We've heard of how some ethnic groups had been wiped out by the red-cap people.

'While I decry open war in the true sense of the word, I don't want us to return to our houses without taking any firm action against Akan. That would render this meeting useless. Where I differ with Atropen is the manner in which he wants this crisis to be resolved, that is, leaving it completely in the government's hands. We know government is already treating the problem at their own level. But I feel that we should do something more than this. Akan people have taunted us enough. They've taken our leniency for weakness. Our patience is exhausted. Few people would have persevered as we have. Even one of their sons, Achamba, has

written to me commending our composure. There are effective ways other than war through which we can force the Akan people to their knees. This is where I differ with Ekunidi.'

Akaya was heavily applauded. Several other people spoke and suggested ways in which Akan could be punished. Measures ranged from avoiding sharing meals or drinks with the Akan men to putting an end to inter-village marriages between Akan and Anjong. But sterner and more stringent economic measures were proposed by Ubeno and Ekunidi who felt that anything short of an economic warfare against Akan would be innocuous. In a speech that was several times interrupted with applause, Ubeno began:

'*Mbe* has spoken well. I thank him. I know some of you are probably asking yourselves why I should be speaking again when some have not even spoken once. Maybe some of us are more Anjong than others. I still strongly believe that suggestions made by previous speakers though not childish are really harmless. For the Akan man would say if you refuse to share a meal with him, he will do same with you, and that's all. Who gains and who loses? Is it the Akan man or the Anjong man? I leave you to find the answer. A simple and childish measure indeed.

'Let us not drag this issue any longer. The hand that lingers at the anus will touch excrement. A better approach to the problem would be for us to ask ourselves a few questions: who produces what in Dudum? Who provides what? Our main foodstuffs in Dudum are raffia wine, plantains, cocoyams, maize, beans, and palm oil; our chief animals are cows, goats and pigs. Who produces the bulk of all these? A brief examination will reveal that Anjong and the rest of Upper Dudum produce all these crops and rear these animals. Apart from palm oil which comes from Akan nothing else can be cited to their credit. But we can go without palm oil from Akan and still be sufficiently supplied from Ebang and Tin. Now imagine what would become of the Akan man if we boycotted their market and cut off the supply of our food stuff to them. None of you doubts how many times the Akan men and women keep on invading us for food and drink. I hope that if we refuse to show the Akan man our strength in real war, we should at least let him taste our economic power. Let us show them that without us they cannot survive down there. Let us show them what it means for a child to bite the finger that feeds him.'

The people roared when he ended. Many moderates were won over.

It was with satisfaction that most delegates returned home. They had at last arrived at a decision to counter the aggression from Akan. In the evening Akaya went up to his *ndek*, dispensing with his attendant, Nyamasi, and personally delivered the news about the resolutions taken by Anjong. He threatened that severe punishment awaited any Upper Dudum man who violated the sanctions against Akan. He nevertheless called for calm and asked that no one should commit any outrage against an Akan man nor take the law into his hands. There was no conventional war against Akan. The war against them was an economic war intended to starve them. Therefore, he concluded, starting from the following Akan market day, no Anjong trader or person should be found in Akan market. No Anjong man should sell anything anywhere to an Akan man or woman.

It was quite some time now since Achamba had written to Echunjei. She had still not replied to his letter. He began to wonder whether the letter really got to her at all. Could it have been intercepted by someone? But as far as he was aware the college authorities never censored girls' letters. His speculative mind moved from one conjecture to another. The content of the letter might have discouraged her. But no. He had carefully chosen his topics, words and expressions. Though it was a love letter, it had been intentionally low-keyed. He had skilfully avoided chasing the girl away with an imprudent over-flow of passion. He had approached the central and delicate issue - her strained relation with Eziaga - with the tread of one fearing to scare away the game he intended to pounce upon. He merely touched on it.

But he had dwelled on her studies and school, encouraging her to study harder and asking her to let him know which subjects presented more problems to her. He had also told her of the latest event from home: the invasion of Abang by Akan. Perhaps that piece of bad news had prevented her from writing him. Perhaps she was ill.

Achamba could have given anything in the world just to know how he stood in Echunjei's mind. Should he write her a second letter? If so, how would she interpret it? Certainly she would take it that he was begging her. But none ever loved who never worshipped the object. He would write her another letter. Women may scorn but men must woo.

With that decision, Achamba sat down and wrote Echunjei a shorter letter:

Dearest Miss Echunjei,

How are you? Did you see my first letter? I sent it about a month ago. I know you should be very busy with school work now. That probably explains why you haven't been able to reply to my letter.

I don't know but I have this strange feeling that you might be ill. Please let me know, as soon as you can, how you're doing. You can't imagine how much a letter from you will mean to me. While expecting to hear from you soon, I remain, your admirer, Achamba.

Chapter Eleven

The drum message from Akaya's *ndek* was received in parts of Akan with dismay. It had never occurred to them that such a mad thing could have been thought of. As some far-sighted people saw it, Anjong could not have devised a worse way of countering Akan's stubbornness. It was a crippling blow. Others, however, contested this, saying that Anjong's economic war would not last. Anjong could not stay without the palm oil from Akan. Their foodstuff would rot away in their barns unless they sold them to Akan. But those who speculated thus soon had reason to be worried, for when the Akan women, in their occasional search for food, visited parts of Anjong, they met with cold reception: suppliers refused to sell them anything. Raffia-wine tappers refused to sell even as much as a drop to Akan men and women. The disappointed traders returned home with empty vessels to their disgrace. As the Akan traders passed near Back-to-Land, a group of young men from Anjong drinking in the bar jeered at them:

'You've not yet carried empty jugs and cane baskets. You're still going to do so for long.'

Emburacho who was among them shouted:

'You people say you're wise men; why do you come to beg for food from us? Let politics feed you. Tell Abaago to give you food. If you value your heads, don't come round molesting us, or I shall break someone's head with a bottle.'

The manager of Back-to-Land refused to sell any beer to the thirsty Akan traders.

The Akan people were not happy with the rising tide of hostility from Anjong. They had barely had an inkling of what Anjong was up to. The full impact of Anjong's intention was, however, felt on Akan market day when not a single Anjong person showed up in the market. The boycott had worked. It was a gloomy and an embarrassing show. Tins and calabashes of oil were lined up in a major section of the market with not a customer passing nearby. On the other hand, the few groundnut sellers were assailed by buyers

who soon devoured all that was available in the name of groundnuts. The bars were empty and forlorn, except one in which there was a single jug of raffia wine, and that too was drained in no time. There was neither food stuff nor meat from Upper Dudum.

Dissatisfaction and discontent, dismay and cool rebellion could be read from the faces of the Akan people who attended the market that day. It was unprecedented humiliation. The people began to feel rebellious towards their political leaders. Two angry Akan men who had come to buy food started a conversation as they returned home, empty-handed.

‘This is where Abaago and his group are leading us. This is the heaven they promised us.’

‘First it was our men held in Mbambe, with little to eat. And now it is ourselves right at home here going to starve because a few people feel they are wiser than the majority.’

‘They have forced the poor Akan man to abandon his father’s compound and to resettle around the market in the name of development. People have buried their money at Ugum and nothing is forth coming. Yet none of them is willing to transfer to the supposed new area.’

‘How could one go to live on rocks? What’s in Ugum except that name? The politicians keep on encouraging others to move to Ugum but stubbornly cling on to their own old compound’.

Ugum was a site set aside for resettlement in Lower Dudum. It was the equivalent of Nyebe in Anjong. Abaago had reasoned that if any leadership role was to go to Akan a township was indispensable. They had first of all to unite down there and show positive signs of self-reliant development to be able to convince the government that they were ripe for an administrative unit. Abaago had ambitious plans for the Akan people, which included a community hall, a health centre, a postal agency and a water project, all of which were to grow up around a bustling township. For this reason he had persuaded the chief, and both had persuaded the people of Lower Dudum to embark on the resettlement scheme. The appeal met with some enthusiasm at the beginning, but as time went on the eagerness evaporated. And by the time of the Anjong boycott the idea was almost a forgotten dream. True, some enthusiasts had hurriedly put up a few brick houses here and there

on the stony ground. But because of the infertility of the area and its crookedness and distance from habitable homes, the few who had attempted doing so soon left, and the houses that had been constructed were now abandoned to grass, rats, lizards and snakes. The Ugum Town, as it was fondly called, became the town of ruins and dilapidation.

Most of Akan felt that Abaago and his advisers had gone too far. They had brought the worst misfortune onto the people. But Abaago and his collaborators showed little or no regret. They claimed to have acted in the best interest of the Akan people. For them to go and appeal to Akaya to end the boycott would be an admission of inferiority. That could not be. Abaago and his people were too proud to sue for peace in such a humble manner.

On Anjong market day a group of strong Anjong men was standing at the road junction near Back-to-Land at Nyeba. They were on the section of the road leading to Akan, and their duty was to turn back any oil trader from that village. The very group had been there on *Njed*, the Akan market day, to turn back Anjong traders or people intending to go down to Akan. Akan traders had known they would be disgraced at Nyeba, so most of them stayed at home. But a few stubborn and desperate ones still went to Anjong. They were driven back when they got to the checkpoint; that is, those who had brought oil. But those that had nothing were allowed to pass through because no one knew which among them were going to take a Land rover from the market to Mbambe or Bamenda. Anjong people did not want to meddle with their ordinary concerns. They were, however, warned by the Anjong men that they should not attempt to buy or carry anything back to Akan because the things would be confiscated at the checkpoint.

Physically there was nothing to differentiate the Akan man from the Anjong. But what clearly made an Akan man different from an Anjong man was their accent. The Akan and the Anjong people spoke Dudum with different accents. Hence whenever two people from the different sectors conversed, they knew each other's place of origin. It was this accentual distinction that betrayed the Akan people who had successfully gone through the checkpoint and were determined to buy some food items in the market. Generally they tried to do so but were detected and their plans foiled. However, a

few, helped by friends and relatives, succeeded. Towards evening, thanks to the approaching darkness, some mingled with Anjong customers and, undiscovered, they drank wine in the bars and even in Back-to-Land.

Those who had been aided to buy some food waited until late in the night before they set out for Akan; there was no control at the junction then.

In the absence of oil from Akan, Mengom and Ebang-oil producers had brought their oil to the market. It was a fruitful day for them. Oil prices had gone up, but Upper Dudum was not badly hurt by the increase. Food, unlike oil, was very cheap. Land rovers that had come down from town went back full of cocoyams and plantains.

The Anjong people refused to shake hands with those from Akan, still less to share a drink, kola-nut or food with them. Only relatives and close friends did so, and under cover. The air in Dudum was filled with ill-feelings and mutual distrust.

The news of the boycott shocked Achamba just as he had been shaken by that of the invasion. He did not hesitate to go up to the authorities in Mbambe to enlighten them on the Dudum situation, pleading that they should intervene to save his area from an outright confrontation. The following day he was granted a request for three days off.

He waited on the dusty tract of road to catch a vehicle home. He stood there until late in the afternoon when a mission ambulance arrived. It was going to Anjong, and Achamba counted himself lucky, for he could possibly have spent a whole day there without finding a vehicle home; it was not a popular market day.

They arrived at Anjong in the evening and Achamba, who was very thirsty, went to Back-to-Land to buy a drink for himself. But being an Akan man, he was not sold any, and the bartender started to taunt him. As the exhausted Achamba was not in the mood for argument, he went out quietly and continued his journey home. He did not find his parents in when he got to Akan. When he inquired where they were, he was told they were in a neighbouring compound where a family relation, Anyajuh, had died. He proceeded to the compound where relatives had been mourning for three days. Active weeping had died down, but on seeing Achamba, the bereaved burst

into fresh wailing. Achamba entered the hut in which most mourners were sitting and sat down. Though he was moved (and he actually wiped away a few tears), he found it hard to weep aloud.

The deceased was an elderly man almost of Embuta's age. In the best of times such a man would have been given a prestigious funeral celebration. There was reason for such pomp; Anyajuh was a man of title, survived by two wives, three adult sons, four married daughters and several grandchildren. But as the family complaint now went, he had chosen a bad time in which to depart from them. Anyajuh had died at the time of near starvation, when the economic warfare against Akan was really in force.

Anyajuh's family indirectly accused the deceased of dying at a period when life was too difficult for them to do him honour, as if he had any power over his destiny. Many distant relatives had gone back to their homes because there was little food and drink to keep them in the compound. There was money, no doubt, but nothing to buy with it. In fact only two large jugs of raffia wine had been drunk during the first three days of mourning. Traditionally the old man, because he was survived by responsible adult children, deserved to be buried in the favourite hut in which he lived. But because of the elaborate and expensive preparations that this entailed, he was buried, as it were, in the cold like a man of no title. However, Anyajuh's children promised to 'rebury' their father in a befitting style at a more prosperous time.

The next day Achamba went to Chief Umeitoh's palace to discuss the latest grievances between the two villages. He had managed to buy a little calabash of decent raffia wine for the chief. The wine, a rare commodity these days, was at a premium. When Achamba had performed the usual ceremonial salutation of bowing and clapping of hands, Chief Umeitoh called him.

'Achamba, welcome. What's new from Mbambe?'

'Nothing, *Mbe*. Our people are well.'

'How are they treated by the D.O.'s people?'

'Right now they are well-cared for, *Mbe*.'

'Good. I was told of how you went and delivered the kola-nut we sent to him. But what did you yourself as son of the soil do to your people? What did you do to relieve them?'

‘Well, I did just what any dutiful son in my place would have done. I paid them regular visits and gave them money with which to buy food and tobacco.’

‘That’s a commendable step. Not that we doubted it, though. For, do we not say that when your brother is up a kola-nut tree, you can pick up a juicy kola-nut?’

Then the chief ordered his *chinda* to serve them with kola-nuts and the wine Achamba had brought. Umeitoh continued to talk to Achamba after gulping down the third horn of wine.

‘Now what has brought you home? What’s your mission?’

‘*Mbe*, my visit is connected with the detention of our men, and the recent boycott of our market by the Anjong people. Dudum people, particularly the Akan people, are unpopular in the divisional headquarters. The Mbambe authorities have a bad impression about us.’

At this point Umeitoh ordered his *chinda* to go and call Abaago over his *ndek* to come immediately. They resumed their conversation.

‘What are they saying about us? What do they say about the Akan people?’

‘They decry our quarrelsome attitude, *Mbe*. And for all I know, there may be some drastic steps to be taken against us.’

‘Have they not said anything about a people determined to kill a government market? What steps have they taken against a village that has decided to strangle another to death? Let me hear what Mbambe people are saying about the Anjong people.’

‘Excuse me, *Mbe*, Anjong’s reaction came as a consequence, and not the cause, of the action of our people. You’ll recall that when I was here last holidays I appealed to our people for peace, but today see where their action has taken us ...’

Achamba’s argument angered the chief. His insinuation that the Akan people, and indirectly the chief himself, had ignored his call for peace irritated Umeitoh.

‘What? That we have done what? Achamba, repeat what you have said.’

An ordinary Dudum man could not carry out a heated argument with a chief even if that person was in the right. That right belonged to the advisers who surrounded the chief, and also to his family. Achamba was thus aware of his limitations and wisely held his

peace, with a bowed head; he now counted on Abaago with whom he could be more blunt. But Abaago was not around. The *chinda* came in and delivered the message that Abaago was not at home. Achamba's hopes were dampened. Nevertheless, he pleaded.

'*Mbe*, forgive me. I've erred. Our people have a saying that we reject but the ill-advised talk of a man and not the man himself. I was humiliated in a bar at Anjong yesterday when I arrived from Mbambe and wanted to buy a drink to quench my thirst. An Anjong man treated me rudely.'

'And what did you do? When I was like you I should have given that man a dirty slap.'

'But I didn't, *Mbe*. I didn't judge the moment appropriate. I would have only worsened the present situation. That would have defeated the purpose of my present mission: that of preaching peace. I would like our two villages to live in peace.'

'So you will want me to go and kneel before Akaya and beg him to lift the sanctions against us? You want the legitimate head of Dudum to go and lick the dust before an interloper, don't you?'

'By no means, *Mbe*. I wouldn't suggest any such thing. That would be mean, indeed. But perhaps you and your councillors could sit and discuss the issue in more appropriate language. We're crying for development, but this could not take place in an atmosphere as tense as it now reigns in Dudum. Many things are still to come to Dudum, but all these depend on the stability of the Dudum situation.'

'Well, no serious father has ever begotten a son and disowned him. Abaago and I will think over your suggestion; the Council will discuss it. But when you get back, make sure you present to the D.O. our side of the case. That's why we boast of children like you. Do your best to make him know that we're not just finding fault with Anjong for the sake of it. It's a just cause we're pursuing. Tell him the history of chieftaincy in Dudum. My grandfather was the paramount Chief of Dudum in the days of the Germans until the British came and changed the ruling house and gave the throne unjustly to Ebaichu, the grandfather of Akaya. I'm not the one really asking for such rights. It is the earth which is crying. The earth is demanding justice. You see. You make the people in Mbambe see the real truth. My people become ill very often and the sorcerer

attributes that to the earth that is angry because of the injustice. Ill luck befalls us because a thief is on the throne and is arrogating to himself the right to govern all Dudum people. Tell them all this and see that our men are released.'

Achamba left the palace and went back to his father's compound. Embuta was now back home. They had not conversed since Achamba arrived the day before. Embuta wondered what could be the cause of Achamba's prompt visit. He thought it might be due to Anyajuh's death. He equally thought that Achamba probably had come to disclose the name of the girl he had promised them. But when Achamba told his father the reason for his visit, Embuta warned him to be careful with the Akan men. He himself had nearly become their enemy because of his anti-war stand.

The next morning Achamba got to Anjong and asked to speak to Chief Akaya, but his *chinda*, who knew who Achamba was, told him the chief was not at home. Achamba returned to Mbambe, after doing most of the journey on foot for nearly three hours. Luckily for him the weather was dry; besides, he had been well-armed for the journey. He was wearing a pair of brown tennis shoes, and a T-shirt over a pair of faded blue jeans.

Chapter Twelve

Eziaga remained unshakeable against accepting Ujakwe in the place of Echunjei. As he had promised his father, he got another girl of his choice. She was the daughter of Azobi of Afed. Since Azobi's daughter was already betrothed, it therefore meant that a lot of money must have been spent on her already. Eziaga had met Akeh, for that was the girl's name, several times in Ebang market but had not paid enough attention to her because Echunjei was still his official fiancée.

But with their strained relationship, he gradually began to be more and more interested in Akeh. When he started to court her, he learned that her fiancé was an elderly polygamist whom the girl detested. But her parents insisted on her marrying him because he was a man of substance. His name was Asiri, and he had given many goats, pigs, and tins of oil to Azobi's family already, excluding raw cash. Ekunidi thought this was too much for him to refund within a short time. If you decide to seize someone else's wife, as the saying goes, 'at noon, in plain daylight,' you should be ready to demonstrate your worth by cashing down all that has been spent on her by the first husband. But Eziaga pressed on arguing:

'Now do you imagine, father, what we will pay to Chief Akaya at the end of his daughter's course? All that we've given her parents won't be enough. It is we who will finally shoulder the responsibility of Echunjei's education. Alone we aren't able to sponsor her in college. And do you imagine what bill will be presented to us when she completes? I think what we will spend on Akeh will be less, compared to what we would have spent on Echunjei. Chief Akaya has openly preferred the education of his daughter. He should be proud enough to refund what they've taken from us. Akaya is not a man to find it difficult to pay back our money. You only need to tell him, and he'll do so. This is my last say in this matter. No one should blame me if I misbehave. After all there are many of my mates in the coastal area, with wives whose dowry they came to pay later on.'

The hint that a young man in despair might after all spurn his parents' advice and elope with another person's wife worried Ekunidi. He wondered why until now the idea of such a possibility had not occurred to him; for there were many elopements that he knew of. Many a young man had disappeared with another person's wife. Ekunidi began to soften and showed more tolerance.

A few days later, he went to Akaya and presented him with his son's decision, saying that did not mean the end of their friendship which was older than the marriage business anyway. Chief Akaya agreed to refund all that his family had taken from Ekunidi's family. He chose a day on which Ekunidi would come back and collect the things. Ekunidi, accompanied by three other family members, bought wine and went to Akeh's parents to seek ways to 'open up a conversation' of friendship with them. Akeh's parents, who themselves had been under fire from their daughter, did not really reject the suggestion. They had repeatedly asked their daughter, and she had accepted the idea. But they insisted on the fact that Asiri had spent much money already.

'We don't refuse to be friends with you,' replied Unabid, Eziaga's paternal uncle. 'Your reply makes our hearts sweet. But you should give us a little time to go and chase. Let us go and hunt. We shall inform you when we're ready.'

'If you really want to enter into serious friendship with us,' insisted Akeh's uncle, 'you should come back and show us your face quickly. Asiri doesn't allow us to sleep these days. He threatens to commit suicide if we don't give back his money since our daughter has jilted him. So go and come back quickly.'

Before Ekunidi's people left, they were given a catalogue of all that had been spent by Asiri on Akeh. They planned on how they would get the necessary dowry to pay on her. There was quite a substantial sum to be taken from Akaya. On top of this, Ekunidi had a herd of goats and three fattened pigs already, excluding fowls. The uncles and other relatives were ready to augment this if there was need. And if the worst happened, Ekunidi could pawn some of his many farms. These sources would certainly provide enough dowry on Akeh.

It would be an exaggeration to say, as the Anjong people claimed, that apart from palm oil, nothing else was produced in Akan. Akan did, in fact, produce some plantains, cocoyams and cassava. In no part of Dudum could one go without finding a few plantains growing behind a man's house. And where there were plantain groves, there were also cocoyams. But while Upper Dudum had extra fertile land for various food crops, Lower Dudum was largely dominated by palm trees. And few other crops grew where there were palm trees.

Thus the predominance of palm trees reduced the quantity of other food crops that could be grown by Akan people. Consequently, they supplemented their meagre supply of cocoyams and plantains by buying more from Upper Dudum. The boycott now forced them to depend mostly on what their grudging soil could yield them. And though the Akan people felt the pinch of hunger, they did not experience real starvation.

Anjong's attempt to starve Akan paradoxically helped to galvanise them into more development projects. Akan people had now gone back to the unmotorable section of the road linking them to Anjong. They were more determined than ever to complete it and open up their area to vehicles and other civilizing influences. Abaago had addressed them in their market on the necessity of concerted effort.

'We now need a motorable road more than ever. If we had completed this little section still left, what Anjong people have done would not have affected us very much. Our oil would have been bought by people with vehicles from Bamenda. All of you now see why I have always stressed the importance of a road to our village. Some have criticized me, but now I am proven to be right. We have begun roofing our market sheds with aluminium-iron sheets; that is good. But we still appeal to those who have not yet had a plot at Ugum Town to do so; else they'll soon begin to regret. As soon as this little patch of road is completed, cars will be flowing to Akan market. I assure you. Work, watch and see. The Post Office, the maternity centre, the court hall and the civil registration centre which we desperately need will just follow. Let us then take work on the road very seriously. We've, no doubt, suffered from Anjong's

boycott but we're still alive. So, men, women and children should go out and work on the road. No one should remain behind except the very young ones and invalids.'

The Akan people thus heeded Abaago's appeal and on *Ukie* they reported at Lower Feg to work on the road. The men carried crow-bars, axes, forks, spades and shovels with which they worked. With palm fronds and hoes, women and children scooped and dragged the loose earth. Each quarter head went up and down blowing his horn to spur his own people. The road was shared in sections according to the number of quarters in Lower Dudum. The quarter heads cracked jokes here and there, shouted in real or mock anger at lazy workers or drove with a long whip a group of giggling girls into stampede. Some gave demonstrations amidst cheers and fulsome praises. The people, unlike their grandparents, worked with cheerfulness.

The stories went that Dudum people long in the past had suffered at the hands of the Germans when they built most of the now abandoned roads found all over their hills. There were horrible stories of how the Germans had whipped their grandparents until they bled or even died on the spot. One story had it that they were forced to dig the ground with their bare nails! But many years after the departure of the Germans, however, some Dudum people would still wistfully hypothesize that had the Germans won the Great War, Cameroon would probably have been the most advanced African nation today. Many who had survived the war spoke nostalgically about the German rule in Cameroon and loved everything German.

There was a particular man from Anjong called Nyanga but popularly known as 'Jaman.' He always pulled crowds of children around him, especially on Anjong market days or whenever he passed near Anjong school. Children loved to follow him shouting, 'Jaman, Jaman,' and he would reply, vigorously jabbing the air with his German walking stick, 'Jah dankel! Jah dankel!' Some children out of pure mischief would then anger Nyanga by saying, 'Engilisi!' at which Jaman would run furiously at the miscreants. Nyanga was one of those who never forgave the English for defeating the Germans. An English man and, for that matter, everything English, was his enemy. Children enjoyed seeing Jaman in genuine anger after they had teased him ...

In the afternoon when the people were tired, they all sat down to eat in groups. Overseers went round to take the roll-call in order to know those who had not come to work. People who were absent were levied certain fines. A group of strong young men from each quarter was charged with the collection of these fines. A similar female group was responsible for collecting the same penalties from women who failed to turn up for the road construction. These squads of collectors known as *Akwatura* were military in their ways. They executed their duties on the very evening of the day of work, no matter whether the defaulters were in their houses or not. The *Akwatura* had their way all the same, storming compounds and plundering the inhabitants of their goods. They carried away booty which they found like silver pots, machetes and hoes. If they found none, any domestic animal that came their way was caught and carried away, alive or dead.

However, the *Akwatura* members did overreach themselves occasionally; for any blind raid made on a desperate man's compound could endanger their lives. This had been the case three years back with Atandu. Atandu, an old childless widower, lived alone in a shanty hut at the end of the village. Like Jaman of Anjong he belonged to the good German past. Life had lost its lustre to him, and he just went on living in total resignation; he could not do otherwise. Road construction had no meaning to him.

That day since he had not gone out for work, Atandu was sure that in the evening those impudent *Akwatura* fellows would come to molest him. He took out his worn-out machete and honed it very carefully on the flat and equally worn-out stone in front of his hut. When he had finished, he tested the edge of the machete with his right thumb. It was very sharp. He sheathed it and hung it above his cracked mud bed, with his spear nearby.

In the evening the saucy *Akwatura* squad came as expected. In their characteristic style, they smashed an earthen pot of water standing in Atandu's compound and slashed three or four plantain stems which went down in one lamentable heap. Scared dogs, goats and pigs ran about in confusion. The alarm raised outside brought Atandu's mounting anger to its climax. Why should they be chasing his animals? What had he a solitary dying man to do with their road? In terrible rage Atandu rushed out, too choked to speak. He

pursued them, his raised machete firmly gripped in his right hand. But the youths escaped unhurt. From that day, Atandu was left alone, never to be molested any more. That was three years ago.

The present *Akwatura* groups did not encounter such a threat. They caught live animals which they took to the compounds of the various quarter heads. The animals were killed, cooked and eaten by the *Akwatura* members, while tools that had been seized were auctioned out.

A letter was lying on Achamba's table when he returned from his three days' leave. Though the sender's name was not on the back of the envelope, Achamba noticed that it was a feminine hand. It was with pleasant suspense, and slightly trembling fingers that he tore open the envelope. Yes, the address was there. Echunjei had finally written! He hurriedly went through the letter. Nothing particularly negative. Achamba sat down and went through it once more, this time more carefully.

Dear Mr. Achamba,

Thank you for your second letter. I did receive the first one too. You're right, we've been too busy with class work. Besides, I had a bad headache which prevented me from writing you much earlier.

I'm now well but still occupied with studies. My favourite school subjects are chemistry, biology and maths. I used to like history and literature, but I no longer do. In fact, I hate them.

It's a pity that your people invaded our village and caused so much harm. My dad also wrote me about the invasion. Whenever I think of all that is going on in Dudum I partly wish I were not born there.

Yours, sincerely,

Echunjei.

True, the letter did not contain anything that could have destroyed Achamba's growing interest in Echunjei. But it was not equally what he would call a classic love letter, either. Achamba was nearly disappointed in its plain tone. He gave yet a third reading

to it, now reading between the lines and, perhaps, giving an unjustified depth to it. He sought for a love expression or a hint of it here and there. But there was none. Its conclusion carried the rather business-like, 'Yours sincerely' instead of the warm 'Yours lovely ...' But the fact that she had written was significant. It was a positive step to be encouraged and exploited.

An opportunity for Achamba to meet Echunjei came during the National Youth Day Celebration. All colleges in Nkoman were to march in the stadium. He left his own students with his colleagues in Mbambe and went to Nkoman. Achamba did not know how Echunjei would receive him especially as he was not being expected. He stood somewhere in the milling crowd that filled the Nkoman stadium and impatiently waited. He watched schools and colleges slowly march past, paying little attention to the stale formalities of the occasion. His main concern was the Girls' College. It soon appeared in the distance and then gradually came nearer.

The girls were in their best uniforms, and their well-rehearsed march past drew applause from dignitaries and spectators. Achamba's eyes scanned the girls carefully until they fell on Echunjei who was in the middle row. At the end of their marching, they dispersed, like the other colleges, into the huge crowd. Achamba moved to the part of the field where the Girls' College had ended. The girls had gone to change, temporarily bidding goodbye to their uniforms. Achamba in the huge crowd did not know which direction to choose in looking for Echunjei. After having been jostled about for some time, he stumbled on her in the company of two other girls. The two girls were soon taken away by two boys, leaving Echunjei with him. He asked her how she felt and whether her headache had eased off, and she said she was all right. Since it was now break time, Achamba suggested that they get to a corner and have a drink. She agreed and he stopped a taxi which took them to the section of the town where his Bafut friend, Neba, lived. Neba was a telecommunication expert who worked with the Nkoman V.H.F. When they got to his house, they were told by his houseboy that he had gone to his workplace for the afternoon shift. Achamba and Echunjei sat down.

'Is there anything in the fridge?' he asked Francis the houseboy.

'Yes sir, there are three beers,' replied Francis.

'Is there nothing else? You have no soft drinks?'

'No sir.'

'What would you like to drink, Miss?' Achamba asked Echunjei.

'I'd like a Fanta.'

'Francis?'

'Sir.'

'Take. Go and bring us two Fantas. Cold ones, O.K.?'

'Yes sir.'

Achamba always felt at home in Neba's house. He had become so familiar with him that he could take liberties with his houseboy. There was a brief moment of embarrassing silence between the visitors when Francis went out to buy the drink. Intending to break it, Achamba stood up and walked to the record-player on the central cupboard in the parlour. He put on a long-play disc. It was a *makossa*-hit song; it started in a rather jarring manner because the machine was in full volume. He quickly reduced it and asked Echunjei whether it was low enough.

'It's all right like that,' she replied.

'I didn't even ask your opinion. I wonder if you like *makossa*.'

'I do. Everyone likes Manu Dibango.'

'Do you have dances in your college?'

'No, we don't have official dances. But there are some girls with radio-cassettes. Our school authorities are too strict about dances. Senior students dance secretly in their dormitories.'

'I guess the authorities want their students to be successful in their examinations. If they give you liberty to do what you like, some of you may neglect your work.'

'That's true. But not necessarily always. There are girls who have been very studious but who, at the end of their course, still failed their exams. Some rascally ones have even done better.'

'Well, that's part of the mystery of examinations. Occasionally you have cases like that.'

Francis came in with two bottles of Fanta and placed them in front of Achamba and Echunjei. He opened a Fanta and served Echunjei, and as he was about to open the other one for Achamba, the latter stopped him.

'No, don't open it. I'd like a beer. Let me have a '33' from the fridge.'

The boy went and brought one, opened it, and served his master's friend before disappearing into an inner room.

'The other Fanta is for who?' asked Echunjei.

'It's yours.'

'I won't be able to finish two.'

'Try; I'll help you if you can't. But it's pure water. Fanta doesn't intoxicate like beer.'

'Well, it's just a habit. I've never taken more than a Fanta in one sitting.'

Achamba had another sip of his beer and then changed the conversation.

'I nearly forgot, I saw your letter.'

'When did you receive it?'

'A few days ago. You wrote in it that your favourite subjects were chemistry, biology and maths. Do you do well in them?'

'On the average yes, not that I'm the best student at them.'

'Which art subjects do you like?'

'I used to like history, but the dates soon began to confuse me and I dropped it.'

'Not every date is important, you know. The important ones just stick in your mind on their own.'

'But I find them rather confusing.'

'So you find it easier to cram chemical and mathematical formulae and equations than historical dates?'

'They aren't the same thing. First of all it's the interest that matters, you see. I happen to have a special interest for science subjects.'

'What about literature? Don't you like literature?'

'I do, but our literature teacher made some of us lose interest in the subject.'

'In what way?'

'He was very unjust, always favouring students he knew.'

'You shouldn't be discouraged. Don't drop the subject. You may have a better teacher next term. Keep on reading more and more novels. That will increase your chances of passing in the English paper.'

'I know English is difficult, but many people have been passing it without necessarily doing literature. We've told our literature

teacher that we're determined to pass in the English paper minus his literature.'

'Don't be forced to neglect a good subject because of a single teacher.'

'No, his own injustice is too much.'

'Please never drop literature. Continue with it.'

Achamba, noticing that Echunjei's glass was empty, refilled it and then went on.

'By the way what would you like to be in the future?'

'You mean what job I'd like to do?'

'Yes.'

'Nursing.'

'Why would you like nursing?'

'Because I like it. I'd like to cater for people who are ill.'

'Though I believe that nursing is a noble and meaningful profession, I feel it's sometimes a cold job.'

'How is it cold?'

'I couldn't imagine my wife working, say, during odd hours in the night when she's supposed to be at home with my children. It may distract her interest from her domestic duties.'

'The problem won't arise in my case.'

'How? What do you mean?'

'I mean that I'll devote most of my time to my job since I won't marry.'

For a moment Achamba was at a loss for words. But he quickly wiped away the slight embarrassment.

'How can that be possible? Aren't you betrothed to Eziaga?'

I was, but I've told my parents that I don't have anything to do with him anymore.'

'I see; so you've rejected Eziaga?'

'Yes. I have.'

'Did you tell him so?'

'I guess he's got the message.'

'But I know of no girl from our clan who has decided to remain single forever.'

'I hope to be the first then.'

'Do you know how your parents will take it?'

'I don't. And I've not told them, nor do I necessarily need to.'

'You'll be ostracized from the area. Our tradition disapproves of planned celibacy.'

'Oh, I'd be glad. I love solitude.'

Achamba looked at his watch and it was showing a quarter to two, just fifteen more minutes before the resumption of the afternoon activities on the stadium. He went and changed the record on the player. The *makossa* hit had ended long ago, but they had since forgotten the music. He asked Echunjei what record he could play next. She said any, and he put on another long-play, this time a *soukous* from Zaire. He loved Zairean music very much, especially Tabu Ley and Franco. It was Tabu Ley that first set him off appreciating music. Achamba sat down, nodding to the rhythm of the Lingala tune.

'Please empty your glass and let me open the other Fanta,' he appealed to Echunjei.

'I told you I wouldn't finish two.'

'You won't drink anymore?'

'No.'

'Francis? Francis?'

'Sir.'

'Come here.'

Francis came out from the room.

'Drink that Fanta O.K.?'

'Thank you, sir.'

The boy grabbed the Fanta and once more disappeared into the room. Echunjei looked at her watch. It was almost time to leave. They both emptied their glasses and stood up to go. Achamba told Francis to inform his master that they had called on him in his absence. He gave the houseboy FCFA 200 and they went off. They separated when they got to the field; Achamba returned to Mbambe while Echunjei remained to watch the many dances and games that were going to take place.

Chapter Thirteen

A month had gone by since Anjong declared an economic war against Akan. True, the Akan people were hard hit by the blow. A few petty businesses had been shut down, and eating and drinking houses in Akan market were no longer fully operational. Important celebrations such as Anyajuh's reburial were put off for lack of sufficient food and drink for the elaborate ceremonies. As hunger stared the people in the face, the joke went round Anjong that the Akan people were living mainly on palm kernels, and that the chaff from the kernels had so twisted their entrails that many of the people were sick.

But the Anjong people themselves were not unperturbed by the adverse effects of their own judgement. To a certain extent, it was a boomerang. The price of palm oil continued to go up in Upper Dudum, and the Anjong people were not happy with it. Some could not bear it, and as a result there developed a black market between the villages, involving the smuggling of key food items. Relatives were not pleased to see their kinsmen starve while they were in a position to relieve them. Blood relation proved stronger than principles of village politics. Three traffickers from Tin were arrested and heavily fined by the Anjong Council. The three had gone down to Akan one *Njed* midnight, carrying with them beef which they bartered for three tins of oil. Except for the routine drumming of Dudum Falls which, owing to the great stillness of the night, had acquired an increased, unsettling loudness, not a single sound could be heard. Unfortunately for the men, they were betrayed on their return journey by the bamboo torches they carried. Unabid and Ekunidi who were returning from a late night visit to Ebogochain, the native doctor, had seen the torches and become suspicious. They ambushed the dealers and surprised them a little distance from the junction at Nyeba. The three men were taken to Akaya's palace where each was fined two goats, a cock and a jug of raffia wine.

Greeting of friends, a hitherto habitual practice, became rare as friend distrusted friend. The feeling of mutual suspicion had been heightened by the death of an Anjong man, death that was the result of a sudden belly ache after the man had been drinking in Back-to-Land. It was widely believed that the man had eaten a poisoned kola-nut that had come all the way from Akan. People hence-forth refused kola-nuts from others, and there was an end to the common practice of sharing horns of raffia wine.

It was at the climax of this distrust that the D.O., at Achamba's urging, sent down to Dudum a group of gendarmes to restore healthy neighbourly sentiments. He sent letters through them to Chiefs Akaya and Umeitoh, charging them with the responsibility of maintaining peace in the area. He also appealed to Akaya to lift the so-called economic sanctions against Akan and to both chiefs to drop their belligerent exchanges. At a trying time in the nation's history, he said, the government could not stand by and watch with a smile such a potentially explosive situation. The D.O. authoritatively stated that if the villages persisted in their obstinacy, government would have no other option but to intervene and ensure peace by any means. Concerning the land dispute, he said that while the governor of the province was still to pass his verdict on it, both villages should stay off Ukob, and that any village carrying out any work on the land would be doing so at a risk. Evidence previously collected from the villages was still being scrupulously studied. In conclusion, the D.O. said that as a gesture of goodwill, the authorities in Mbambe had decided to release the Akan detainees the following day. The gendarmes were to remain in Dudum until the villages showed proof of the normalization of their relations and the restoration of peace.

The people of Akan received the piece of news with joy. Their general ordeal as well as that of their jailed men was over. In Anjong it was received with mixed feelings. While most people were happy with the resumption of normal links with Akan, a few hardliners still felt that Akan ought to have been punished for a longer period. In their view the proposed release of the detainees was a blow to Anjong's pride. They had expected the prisoners to spend at least five years in Mbambe.

‘What else could you have expected?’ asked Ubeno as he was conversing with Ndifon. ‘There is Achamba in Mbambe. He certainly intervened in favour of his people. Achamba has bribed the D.O. who is surrounded with cows, goats and pigs. We had flattered ourselves that justice was on our side, but look at what is going to happen. Akan people are soon to be released without serious punishment.’

A few Anjong people tried to protest the D.O.’s order but were deterred by the presence of the gendarme officers. The dreaded gendarmes had a notorious record for brutality in Dudum. They had made countless raids in the past on tax evaders in Anjong market. Right now as the officers were in Dudum, tax defaulters were underground, although the ‘red-cap’ people were for a different mission. The next day the ten prisoners were released.

While they were pleased to be back home, most of them were not happy with Abaago; it was Abaago who had fanned the whole land affair, coaxing them onto the attack on Abang. But when they were arrested by the gendarmes, he was not among them. Any objective investigation would have led to the main brain behind the raid; and that was Abaago. Rumour had it that when the investigation team of gendarmes arrived in Umeitoh’s palace, they were heavily entertained and, after a deal, Abaago’s role and the chief’s became a hushed-up affair. The imprisoned Akan people were suspicious of this, but since they were all members of the *Ikwechong* secret society, they could not betray a kinsman. They therefore endured their lot like the men that they were and looked upon themselves, in the circumstances, as scapegoats.

Chapter Fourteen

The gendarmes who had gone to maintain order in Dudum were back in Mbambe to report to Mr. Rex Mokoli on their mission. The Divisional Officer was satisfied with their work. They had restored calm in the area without any serious confrontation with the inhabitants, apart from isolated incidents here and there.

One of them was a quarrel between an Akan raffia-wine buyer and an Ebang seller of the stuff. The tapper had refused to sell wine to the Akan man. But the latter, emboldened by the presence of the patrolling gendarmes in the area, became arrogant. He angered the wine seller by openly challenging him: he said if he did not sell the wine peacefully, he would be forced to do so. Whereupon the Ebang man seized his empty jug and flung it out of his house and followed up this dramatic display of rage by bundling the owner of the jug and throwing him out too. A gendarme who was not far from the scene of action was alerted, and he rushed onto the spot and ordered the antagonists to stop fighting immediately. After listening to the cause of the brawl, the gendarme commanded the Ebang man to sell the wine. The wine producer demurred, and the officer pulled out his belt from the stripes of his trousers, swung it round his right wrist several times and moved menacingly towards him. That move was enough to silence the Ebang man. He filled the Akan man's jug which luckily was not broken, because it had been woven out of tough fibre. He collected the money absent-mindedly.

The strong belt with a heavy iron buckle at one end was the most dreaded weapon carried by an unarmed gendarme. No Dudum man who had ever been a victim at the hands of raiding gendarmes underrated its power. Two years back a handful of people had lost blood because of that instrument. It was during one of those raids made on tax evaders. A well-planned raid, it took the defaulters by surprise. The Anjong market was already quite full, roaring as usual, though a few latecomers were still trickling in from different corners.

When the raiders landed from nowhere, the market was astir, and there was a terrible panic among the tax-paying males. There was total confusion when the officers began to arrest men or barred their way to ask for their tax tickets. Tax evaders scattered in different directions. But because the gendarmes had carefully surrounded the market, some fleeing males ironically found refuge in the waiting hands of gendarmes well-positioned in the wild elephant grass around the market. They received violent strokes from the dangerous belts, and a lot were sent reeling, with bleeding skulls that sent blood trickling down their faces. Others, nevertheless, managed to escape the gendarmes' vigilance and shot home, refusing to attend Anjong market until they had paid their taxes. This partly explained why the Anjong people had submitted to the D.O.'s order to resume trading ties with Akan. The restrictive presence of the 'red-cap' people with scorching belts inspired horror; the sight of blood oozing from a man's head was paralyzing.

But not all the gendarmes who returned to Mbambe left a good impression back in Dudum. Some had been drunk daily, especially those stationed at Nyebe where Back-to-Land was their regular haunt. Rumours went round that they had harassed the local people who escaped from their grip only by offering them drinks. Others were accused of molesting local women and of even raping them. Meanwhile the D.O. sent word to the Dudum chiefs that he would soon visit their area. Achamba was pleased to hear this, for he saw in it an opportunity for his people to come together for a common goal: welcoming the D.O. Achamba wrote letters to the chiefs to encourage their subjects to turn out *en masse* to receive the D.O. at Anjong, the central gathering place.

Since his last contact with Echunjei, Achamba had written her a letter but had received no reply. He did not know whether she had received it or not and was prevented from writing her another one by the fact that her mid-term holidays were only a few days away. He decided instead to meet her at her aunt's house in Nkoman where she intended to spend the few days. When the day arrived, Achamba left for town very early and, this time, met his friend,

Neba. Neba, who did not have the slightest doubt of his friend's mission, asked him what had brought him to town.

'Just to do a little shopping.'

'I thought so,' said Neba. 'You people in the country side have few shopping facilities around, but I wonder if that was all you came to town for.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that you're surely after a little bird. I suspect that your mission here is more than just shopping.'

'Well, have you seen the bird? Is it around? Show it to me and I'll bring it down with my catapult.'

'Francis told me you had it here last time. Right here in your claws, and I wonder why you didn't bring it down then.'

'Oh no, Joe, one shouldn't rush in such matters, you know. One risks catching the mole by the snout, and it will slip away.'

'Did you plan to meet here?'

'No we didn't, but I heard she'd be at her aunt's.'

'She might be there already. We'll check up for her.'

An hour later they went to the aunt's house and, sure enough, there was Echunjei, washing dresses near the kitchen. She was a little embarrassed to see both young men. They greeted her and merely touched the wet hand she had stretched out to them. She asked them if they minded sitting in the parlour since there were no stools outside. The men went in and sat down, but after they conferred for some time, Neba left Achamba there and returned to his house. Achamba studied the room carefully and noticed two photo albums on a table. But before he had made up his mind to go and take one of them, Echunjei came in wiping her hands with a towel, collected the albums and gave them to him. She regretted not having done so while his friend was around. He went through the albums rather mechanically, paying little attention to pictures most of which were old and unfamiliar to him, anyway. But he pored over the few that belonged to Echunjei, all the time asking himself whether her aunt was around or not. When she had rinsed the dresses and spread them on the line, Echunjei came in and sat opposite Achamba.

'Where is your aunt?' he asked.

'She's gone to Tiba market.'

‘So you’re in alone?’

‘Yes. The children are still in school. They’ll be coming back in the afternoon.’

‘Did you see my letter?’

‘I did but I’m sorry I didn’t reply to it. I was too busy.’

‘I was afraid it might have been intercepted. I nearly wrote a second one.’

‘Our school authorities no longer censor letters... I heard our people have stopped going to your market.’

‘And what do you think about the situation? What’s your opinion about it?’

‘I think your people deserve their punishment. They’re very aggressive.’

‘I won’t quarrel with you. It’s but normal that you take sides with your people. But don’t you see anything wrong with their reaction? Do you think they make the situation better by boycotting Akan market?’

‘Why, that’s a just retaliation. There’s nothing wrong in that. Akan people know they can’t survive without us, yet they keep on provoking us.’

‘Nor can you either. Your village needs ours.’

‘How is that possible? What do we need from you?’

‘Money and oil.’

‘We can do without your oil. We do produce oil ourselves, and strangers from Bamenda can buy our food.’

‘But be realistic, Miss. Experience has shown that without the population of Lower Dudum, Upper Dudum, though rich in food stuff, would still find life difficult. Let’s drop this issue. We may go on arguing for ages.’

‘But your people are terrible, Mr. Achamba. It would be a good idea for people like you to talk to them when you get home.’

‘You’re right. You shouldn’t misunderstand me; I’m merely pointing out the consequences of an eye-for-an-eye attitude.’

‘But what do you expect of my people? You don’t expect them to be angels, do you?’

‘Indeed I don’t, nor do I condone the ill-advised action of Akan people. I’m totally against what they do. In fact, I’ve advised them several times before, but they’ve often ignored my word.’

‘Under the influence of people like Abaago the people can do anything. He’s such a terrible man, the so-called politician.’

‘Luckily the situation is now under control.’

‘How?’

‘Gendarmes were sent to Dudum to restore order.’

‘So there’s no boycott anymore?’

‘No. Normal activities between the villages have resumed... Let’s drink something. What would you like to drink?’

‘I’m not thirsty, thank you.’

‘No, Miss, drink something. I’m thirsty. It would be odd for me to drink alone. Let me get you a Fanta or a Coke. I’ll be back in a minute please.’

With that Achamba dashed out to buy the drinks and was soon back as he said. Echunjei brought two glasses, and he served her with the Fanta and filled himself a glass of beer. He then opened up a new conversation.

‘I hope your studies are going on smoothly?’

‘Just a bit. There’s a lot to revise. You know our final exams are not very far off.’

‘What about your literature teacher? Has he changed?’

‘Yes, he’s stopped that nonsense of his. We took him up to the Principal, and he’s changed ever since.’

‘I’m glad to hear that.’

Achamba emptied his glass and poured himself another glass of beer and, changing the conversation again, asked whether Echunjei had heard from Eziaga.

‘Which Eziaga? Didn’t I tell you last time that I had nothing to do with him?’

‘I see; I’ve forgotten. Who’s taken his place?’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘I mean that now that Eziaga is out of your mind, who’s replaced him?’

‘I don’t know, or rather there’s nobody. I don’t much care.’

‘Why shouldn’t you care? You should care.’

‘I’m still to decide whether or not I should get married.’

Achamba took another sip of his beer. He was clearly pleased in the way things were going even if there were obstacles. The alcohol that had been absorbed into his system was beginning to show its

effect on him. He became more lively and, though he never lost all politeness, was a bit indelicate.

‘When will you then choose between celibacy and matrimony?’

‘I still have a long time to decide.’

‘Tell me when you will.’

‘In twenty years’ time.’

Achamba knew Echunjei was merely kidding, for she barely stifled a laugh which her eyes and the corners of her mouth betrayed. He took the unintentional hint and threw tact to the wind.

‘Stop joking and be serious, Miss Echunjei. Do you know how old you’ll be in twenty years’ time?’

‘Yes. I know I’ll be an old maid then. But that means nothing to me.’

‘Let’s be serious, if someone were to ask your hand in marriage what would you say?’

‘I’d tell him that my answer would be ready only after twenty years.’

‘You’re incredibly amusing. I have the impression that we could go on talking for centuries like this. I never knew you were such a great fun.’

‘I’m not. I’m really serious.’

‘Oh come on, Miss; stop that please... How quickly time flies! I wouldn’t have thought that we’ve been chatting for so long.’

‘What time is it?’

‘A quarter past two.’

‘Oh is it? Then I’ve got to start preparing my aunt’s evening meal. She will soon be back.’

‘Please do. Meanwhile I’d like to call on my friend Joe. I’ll be right back. Perhaps I could take you to the cinema.’

‘No, thank you. My aunt wouldn’t like it, I’m sure.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t think she knows who you are.’

‘I’d be surprised if she allowed you to go out with a stranger. But since you know me very well you can tell her who I am.’

‘I won’t do that. Besides, she’ll be too tired and might need me.’

‘It’s O.K. Next time will do. All the same I’ll call round again before I leave for Mbambe. Bye for now.’

‘Goodbye.’

Achamba had a brisk walk to Neba's house. When he got there, he asked his friend if he had a beer in the fridge.

'I give my beer only to people who have succeeded. If you have, then I'll give you one,' joked Neba.

'Then I can as well be going back to Mbambe right away since I'm a failure. Having been rebuffed by a girl, I find myself most unfortunate to be refused even the barest services of a bosom friend. Well, I'm gone.'

Achamba feigned going out but was good-humouredly dragged back to the parlour by Neba. Neba asked Francis to fetch them two beers from the fridge. And as they drank Neba said,

'Now let's be serious. Have things come to a head? How did you end?'

'I've always told you that I'm never in a haste in such things.'

'You still prowl around with the sensitive horns of a snail. For how much longer will all this be going on Achamba? Why can't you hit the nail on the head?'

'I hate abrupt beginnings; they often make abrupt endings, and I haven't the guts to stand any unfavourable reply. You must know that it's a delicate issue which needs careful handling.'

'I wish Mr. Care success. But what was her own opinion? Was she receptive to the idea?'

'It's hard to say. There might be a glimpse of hope, but let's leave things to time. Time may improve them, you know.'

'Well, good luck, Mr. Care.'

Chapter Fifteen

Achamba and Neba abandoned the romantic topic and took up a different issue. Achamba regretted, as he drank with Neba, that he was born in Dudum. Most of Dudum was a crooked landscape, with rugged hills and rocks jutting out here and there. Compared with the rest of Sokob it was a harsh environment where the inhabitants had to labour hard before being rewarded by a grudging soil. Yet these natural impediments would have counted for nothing had man not also been added. The natural bias that binds a dutiful son to his native home was very alive in Achamba. What distressed him, however, were the man-made problems that tore his people apart: the village politics that had kept them in the dark.

‘You wouldn’t believe,’ he told Neba, ‘that a little area like ours has nineteen chiefs, and the people behave as if we were still in the days of multi-party politics.’

‘Do you mean that after more than a decade KPP and CUP still exist in Dudum?’

‘Not exactly. But the enmity generated by them is still around’.

‘I think this is not very strange. Traces of multi-party politics can be seen in other areas too. Dudum isn’t therefore a special case.’

‘Of course it is. Politics has wounded my area very badly. Take your own area, Bafut, for example; you aren’t as divided as we in Dudum are.’

‘In a way you’re right. Although a few people may still nurse political hatred against others in Bafut, such a tendency has been on the decline ever since the present Fon came to power. Our people are united behind him to work for their common good.’

‘You see, there lies the big difference. In Dudum you belong to either of two geographical zones, and this natural division has helped to nurture the political differences. Even within each camp the different villages, owing to local rivalries, are only tenuously held together. This is quite different from Bafut where there’s only one paramount chief, the Fon’.

'We in Bafut are determined to go ahead with the development of our area even if government aid is slow to come. All the Bafut elite at home and abroad are contributing financially towards an ambitious water project. We intend to bring pipe-borne water to every corner of our area.'

'A community, like a nation, can only progress very well when its inhabitants are fully mobilized and united behind their leader; when they live in a state of peace devoid of mutual distrust and suspicion, petty rivalries and jealousies.'

'What have you done to remedy the situation? What have the elite of Dudum done to improve the lot of their people?'

'That's an important question. But you see the tragedy of our situation is that the so-called elite who ought to act as torch bearers to the people take part in dividing them instead. The germ is rapidly getting hold of the younger generation. It's a sad story, a very sad story indeed.'

'A serious education of the masses is needed, and this responsibility inevitably falls on the elite.'

'Indeed, I have a plan of going round the country to contact all progressive Dudum people to see what we can do to bring peace and unity to our area, beginning with the reconciliation of the chiefs and the main politicians. Apart from politics another crucial issue at the bottom of the problems in Dudum is the question of chieftaincy: the question of who historically deserves to be the paramount chief of Dudum. Each of the major camps lays claim to the right without the backing of an authority or a written document.'

'I'd suggest that you consult the National Archives in Yaoundé when you have the time. You may be surprised by what might have been written about your people by the colonial explorers who came to the Grassland. Recently I was myself surprised at how much has been written about the Bafut people when I went through the bibliography of a post graduate thesis written by a Bafut boy studying in Yaoundé. When I asked him where he had got all his information, he told me he had consulted the National Archives and a few rare books. So you can make a little research. One never knows, you may come upon an illuminating fact.'

'Thank you for the suggestion. I hope to carry out this piece of homework soon.'

At the end of their discussion the grateful Achamba told his friend that he had to return to Mbambe. It was getting close to five p.m. But he went first to a bookshop where he bought two novels and a greeting card, and then he returned to where Echunjei was. The children were already back from school, and she was almost through with her cooking. But her aunt had not yet returned from Tiba. Achamba told Echunjei that since it was not possible for her to accompany him out, he could not pass the night in town. He gave her the novels and the card and extorted a promise from her to write to him as soon as she was back in school. At about 6 p.m., he took a taxi to Mbambe.

It was quite some time now since the resumption of trade links between Upper and Lower Dudum. Petty hawking between the villages increased, businesses that had ceased functioning flourished once more, and important celebrations that had been put off were reconsidered. It was almost like the pre-boycott days again. The family members of late Anyajuh met and decided that it was now appropriate for them to give their titled kinsman a befitting reburial. The message was delivered over the talking drum to friends and relatives in and beyond Lower Dudum. The day chosen for the celebration was *Ichong*.

Though the burden of such an occasion fell on the relatives of the deceased, it was generally the affair of the whole village. The husbands of the 'girls' of the bereaved family were the most heavily taxed. The word 'girls' stood for any female member of Anyajuh's family who had been given into marriage. Their husbands spent so much in terms of cash, goats, pigs, fowls and gun powder. Many large cooking pots had been borrowed from other families, and lots of animals had been slaughtered. The air in the village was heavy with the appetising smell of roast meat.

On the eve of the celebration, Anyajuh's family had invited the famous *Ikwechong* to have a foretaste of the occasion. *Ikwechong* was made up of six men from the Etoh quarter of Lower Dudum. They were said to have been endowed with unusual human powers. Visionaries with 'four' eyes, they had the ability to ward off any

evil spirit that could possibly mar the occasion with torrential rain or deadly lightning. When they arrived at midnight, they were shown into a special hut in the compound, where food and drinks had been preserved for them. They started singing and dancing after they had eaten some food and drunk a few horns of raffia wine. No ordinary human being had ever seen their musical instruments. They sounded eerie; even the voices of the members lost their flesh-and-blood quality. They were a curious mixture of gibbering sounds which made one's hair stand on end. From time to time the men fired gunshots. And no person in Akan had the power to go out of his house that night when those uncanny sounds tore the silence of the night. The only other sound that could be heard that night was the eternal humming away of Dudum Falls... *dim-dim-dim-dim-dim-dim-dim-dim-dim*. At dawn members of the *Ikwechong* group packed their instruments and went away, clearing the way for the general celebration.

In the morning of *Ichong*, food and drinks started pouring into Anyajuh's compound from many quarters. Soon there was no space for any more vessels. Embuta's compound and neighbouring others were taken up for the purpose. Since the real occasion was going to start in the afternoon, the senior members of Anyajuh's family had enough time to inspect and evaluate the food and wine brought by friends and relatives. These items were graded and kept in groups of how they would be distributed to participants and spectators from other villages.

The dance to accompany the big feasting was the *Ichibi*, a men's dance in which women and children featured mainly as spectators. But most women carried calabashes of wine and baskets of food for their men folk. In the afternoon participants began to arrive in Anyajuh's compound. A few people took up the drums and started beating them. It was not yet the actual thing. They were merely testing the instruments and acquainting their hands in preparation for what was to come. Among the instruments were the playing drum, the calling drum, gongs, rattles, and horns. The initial notes emitted from the talking drum also served as a spur to celebrants still on their way. As the invitation tunes were played, men who had not yet loaded their dane guns were doing so, while masked dancers dressed up in a bush nearby. Every available space in the

compound was gradually taken up as women and children chose vantage positions from where they could watch the dance.

The masked dancers wore a nicely woven outfit of ropes that covered them from head to toe. They carried delicately carved wooden masks on their faces depicting a variety of emotions: joy, anger, surprise and so on; skirts of raffia fibres were tied round their waists, while on their ankles were rattles. In all, there were five masked dancers. And when they were ready, the dance began.

The players took up their instruments and started producing those soul-elevating sounds that are the works of talented artists. The dancers encircled the players. In a warming-up tune they briskly danced round them, singing in accompaniment to the instruments. This movement was repeated several times before the people settled down to the real thing.

Four or five men gave a tune and the rest of the dancers answered in a chorus. They had only wrappers around their waists, with the rest of their bodies bare; sheathed machetes were hanging down their left flank. Some dancers wore skull caps with red feathers dangling from them. Their loaded guns were with their wives or children who stood by. When they had danced for some time, the player on the talking drum played the favourite tune of the masks, inviting them.

They left their hide-out and rushed to the dancing scene to the joy of children and women who fled at their approach. One of the masks signalled the players, and the beating of the instruments stopped automatically. He signalled again and another exciting tune was played. The masks then performed a terrific, uniformed display, accomplishing in the process feats of body contortions. The rattles harmonized with the gratifying sounds from the instruments and drove dancers and masks mad. It was ecstatic. The masks lowered their bodies and raised them in unison while ordinary dancers unsheathed their machetes, brandished them and clanked them against one another's.

Occasionally, a dancer would rush to where his wife was standing and enthusiastically seize his loaded gun and feign firing into the crowd to the consternation of scattered spectators. But the impish dancer would safely fire his gun into space, after circling it three or four times over the head of a mask. It was also an occasion for

some dancers to display their marksmanship. They took careful aim at plantain stems, and some really succeeded in bringing down bunches or leaves of plantain to the admiration of onlookers.

When they were tired, they took the calabashes of wine from their wives and drank directly from them. Then they went round, still dancing, quenching the thirst of their friends by passing the same calabashes from mouth to mouth. The main talking drum player, still playing, sent a drum message telling a dancer he was thirsty, whereupon a jar of wine was brought and poured into his widely opened mouth. The dance continued amidst drinking. A drummer would frenziedly beat his instrument until a dancing friend of his brought wine and poured it down his throat. Lumps of meat and well-prepared vegetables were passed round. A well-cooked leg of goat, for example, was passed among ten to fifteen people, each dancer tearing off as big a chunk as the size of his mouth could permit him. All this was light entertainment while the dance was going on.

Late in the afternoon the people sat in groups according to their families. This was the moment for general feasting. The masks were led to their hide-out. And as they left the dancing circle, women and children, who had surged up close to them, were thrown into a stampede. They rushed for cover.

Generally, the *Ichibi* masks were not very fierce. Women and children were not allowed to stare at them from close range. But they could peep at them from a respectable distance. This indulgence was, however, impossible with the *Ibong* mask. *Ibong* was the masked spirit of a single man called Akwazah of Afed. He was the most dreaded and fearsome mask in the whole of Dudum and lived in a deep, dark, and quiet pool in the Ndoroti River on the way to Ngwo.

Ibong emerged from the pool only once a year and, when he did, the day was a local public holiday. No woman or child could venture out when *Ibong* was abroad. His attire, very much in shape like that of *Ichibi*, looked ten times more frightful, owing to the mysterious colours with which it was draped, and also to the long spear he carried in his left hand, the awesome mask on his face and the huge machete in his right hand. His head was hooded with a red cap. Akwazah, who always accompanied *Ibong*, had a whistle with which to communicate with him. When *Ibong* visited a compound, the

owner came out and gave money or any precious gift to Akwazah. But if there was nothing, *Ibong* cut down five or six plantain stems and stabbed any animal he saw.

Thus the men often came out to negotiate with Akwazah and appease the spirit in order to avoid the sad story left behind by a disappointed *Ibong*. Women and children huddled up in a dark corner somewhere in their houses. It was an abomination for women in particular to set profane eyes on *Ibong*; a life time of leprosy and sterility were the consequences, and few women could bear that.

The family of Anyajuh gave spectators and all other groups dishes of porridge, foofoo, plantains, meat and vegetables, and jugs of raffia wine. All sons and daughters of the bereaved family including respectable family elders such as the one-legged Embuta were asked to sit in the centre of the gathering. Two men from different families were chosen to feed them, literally carrying food and wine and putting them into their mouths. As far as the men were concerned, this was their greatest celebration. It was their day, the day on which each adult male 'mourned' over his own eventual death.

Part Two

Chapter Sixteen

The D.O.'s projected visit to Dudum was an occasion for the inhabitants to tidy up their homes. Tiny bushy paths linking compounds were cleared and broadened. Houses, pigsties and barns were repaired. Stray animals that had been a real headache for local women over their crops were tethered and kept under control, while goats' droppings were regularly swept away from courtyards.

In Lower Dudum it was an opportunity for Abaago to rouse the population into more action. The people were forced to go out and completely level up the rough portion of the road they had just completed. Remaining gutters were bridged with huge trunks of freshly felled trees. Palm fronds were spread over the trunks before heaps of loose earth were rolled over them. The earth, mixed with gravel, was beaten smooth so that a Land rover could go over it easily. Abaago told his people that the D.O. would not only end in Anjong but would go down to Akan in his car, the first to land in Akan. The prospect was encouraging. The people toiled tirelessly to have all rough places along the Anjong-Akan road smoothed out.

Three days before the D.O. was due to arrive, Achamba obtained permission from his boss to go down to his hometown. Though recent hot tempers among his people had cooled off generally, they could still be easily rekindled. It was Achamba's aim to hold a working session with the Dudum people so that they should come out united, with specific goals, and not to disgrace themselves once more, this time before their august guest. It was wise that he had done so, for when he got home, there was disorder all over the place, to say the least.

Each camp was preparing its own welcome address to the D.O. Akan was making preparations to welcome the D.O. in Lower Dudum whereas the usual meeting place for such outstanding events in Dudum was Anjong. It was a shame. Achamba shuttled between both sectors to bring them together. He first contacted the headmasters of all the major primary schools in Dudum, particularly

those of Lower Dudum, and persuaded them to see the importance of such unity of purpose and action. With their help and that of their teachers, Achamba succeeded in talking the local politicians, Ubeno and Abaago, especially, into doing something reasonable.

Led by Achamba, key members from both sectors met in Anjong School to draft a common welcome address. It was not easy at all. The people were united only in their demands from the government, but differed in other details. The difficulty arose from the fact that the Akan delegates led by Abaago, insisted on having their own separate social amenities in Akan while Anjong, the seat of the already existing few, wanted them improved and upgraded, transforming the health centre into a hospital, and the postal agency into a Post Office. There was a heated argument which brought the whole affair to the brink of collapse. But this was avoided by a compromise introduced by Achamba. It was that the Dudum people as a whole should ask the government to provide them with a hospital and a Post Office. But that it would be left to the government to choose the location of these.

'Besides,' he added, 'let us ask the government to give us an administrative unit. With an administrative unit, we will then have many other facilities since government departments would be created in the sub-division. Following government planning policy, we will then be given a government secondary school.'

Though the compromise was generally accepted by all, Abaago felt Achamba had ruined the Akan people. Any objective person could see that if government was equally objective, the centre for any serious development in Dudum could be located nowhere else but in Anjong. It was the only village with comparatively level land; besides, it was more centrally placed than the rest of the Dudum villages. Abaago tried to raise an objection against the compromise, but he was voted down by the majority. Other requests that were to be included in the address were loans to graziers, a police post, and the improvement of the road. Thanks to Achamba's timely intervention, the sensitive land issue was avoided. The following day the welcome address was written out by Achamba and the two headmasters of Anjong and Akan primary schools, Anagho and Abuma. Achamba was pleased with it. They had agreed that the D.O. be received in one place only: Anjong School. The final version of the address was read to the select group which approved of it.

But the question of who would read it on the day of the D.O.'s visit was another aching problem. As was to be expected, Abaago and Ubeno were contenders for the honour. Abaago said he would read it and that it was natural that he should do so since he had read several of such speeches throughout his political career. Ubeno stood up and disputed the claim, adding that, if it came to that, his own impressive political past made him even more qualified for the reading than Abaago.

'Abaago, don't take everyone here for a child. Don't bring your Akan CUP politics into this affair. If you want to read the address in your usual selfish manner, say so. But don't try to persuade people to believe that you're the greatest politician around. I'm a politician myself, and the former local President of the KPP. In this capacity I'm even more qualified than you. After all it was my party that finally won the national elections.'

'President of what?' asked Abaago standing up once more. 'I say I shall read this address. I'm most qualified to do so.'

'On what grounds?' retorted Ubeno.

'As a former administrator; I've worked with the people in Mbambe, and I've been reading newspapers. Which papers have you been reading Ubeno? Tell me which papers you've been reading.'

'Administrator, indeed,' said Ubeno. 'So the gathering of papers in an office makes one an administrator? Look here, Abaago, you know that I know who you are. And you yourself know who I am. Are you speaking of foreign newspapers or just those produced locally? Who first started reading newspapers, you or me? Who went to school first, you or me? Don't talk in terms of education. If you want to beat me choose a different area and not education or politics.'

'What? What education have you got Ubeno? You mean your failed Standard Six certificate or something else?'

'Yes. Exactly, just my failed Standard Six. I can boast of my failed Standard Six, but what have you? Nothing at all. You couldn't even go beyond Standard Five. Have you ever been qualified to sit for the Standard Six exam?'

At this juncture Achamba was obliged to step in and put an end to the ugly exchanges.

‘Please gentlemen, let this affair stop. Vulgar expressions don’t become men of your integrity. You’re all distinguished gentlemen in Dudum matters, and it wouldn’t be nice if, on the eve of an important visit to the area by the D.O., you are the very first to disagree. What’s in the reading of an address? Why should it matter who reads it? What would the people of Metta, Njikwa or Batibo say if they knew what is happening here today? Could you imagine what they would say about the Dudum man?’

‘Ask the administrator,’ said Ubeno. ‘Put the question to the great politician.’

‘Please Mr. Ubeno, I have the floor,’ pleaded Achamba. ‘Let me finish what I want to say. Since none of you is satisfied to see the other read except yourself, I’d like to suggest that the address be read by a neutral person. I’d like it to be read by Mr. Anagho, the headmaster of Anjong School. What do you say?’

‘Mr. Achamba. I’m not opposed to your suggestion,’ said Ubeno. ‘Let it be read by him. I perfectly agree.’

‘Oh yes, why shouldn’t I agree? Let him read it. Since he’s the only headmaster in Dudum, why shouldn’t he read it? Who do you think is a child here? You think I don’t know what you people are up to? If I can’t read it, let it be read by Mr. Abuma, the headmaster of Akan School. This is my own choice,’ said Abaago sitting down, and bringing the issue once more into question.

Achamba was visibly irritated. He had come to unite these people, but his efforts were being foiled by trivial matters. He devised another compromise. He got two pieces of paper and wrote something on them, folded them, and threw them on the table. And then spoke to the people.

‘Isn’t it ridiculous that we should come and waste precious time on a thing like this? Gentlemen let’s put an end to this affair. Please abide by what I’m going to suggest. I have two pieces of paper here on the table. I have written ‘Yes’ on one and ‘No’ on the other. Messrs Ubeno and Abaago will each pick up one. The person who picks up ‘Yes’ will read the address. Gentlemen what do you say?’

The other members accepted the proposal. They were themselves fed up with the dispute. They asked Abaago and Ubeno to draw lots and suggested that whoever lost should not regret.

Achamba picked up the pieces of paper again and shook them in his closed fist several times and then cast them on the table. Ubeno was the first to pick up his, and Abaago the other.

'I've got it,' shouted Abaago jubilantly as he waved the piece of 'Yes' paper in the air. 'Justice has prevailed. I told you I was the eligible person to read it.'

'Well, I congratulate you on your luck,' said Ubeno rather philosophically. 'I don't envy your good fortune at all. If I had won the lot, I think Abaago would have been conjuring rain now.'

Achamba thanked the members, and said he was glad they had finally worked out something.

The following day was the day of the visit and people from the nineteen villages were already gathering in Anjong School Compound. The Anjong School children were beating their band while various dance groups were rehearsing at different corners on the school field. There was a great deal of noise. Dudum chiefs and their *chindas* as well as other village dignitaries were sitting in the grandstand. Ubeno was in his black suit, while Abaago wore his immaculate white *agbada* and a felt skull cap. He carried the welcome address in a folded newspaper and was all smiles. A few dance groups together with school children were asked to line up along part of the road leading to Tin. Fresh palm fronds had been planted by the sides of the road. The people patiently waited, but the D.O. was not yet in sight. Some of them were impatient because the sun was getting hotter and hotter.

At about eleven am, two roaring Land rovers were sighted from afar. As they hurtled and bumped their way down the stony hill-side road leading to Anjong Valley, they honked occasionally, to the great joy of the people. Soon the vehicles were passing through their midst with the D.O. waving energetically to the equally enthusiastic crowd. They drove to the field where the bulk of the population was waiting. The D.O. and his entourage were ushered into the grandstand, in front of which the national flag fluttered. Everyone stood silent when the national anthem was played by the Anjong School band. After this Abaago, hale and hearty, climbed onto the podium erected near the pole carrying the flag, to read the address. He gathered his *agbada*, rolling the folds over his arms and throwing them on his shoulders, cleared his throat, and then planted

on his face one of his heart-warming smiles. Many people there were proud that he was a Dudum man. Then he began reading the address which he must have rehearsed several times. After going through the elaborate formal heading, he began the speech proper.

‘It is a singular pleasure for us to have you and your entourage in our midst today. We hope you will have an enjoyable time with us. We are very grateful for the pains you have taken to pay a visit to our area. Our thanks equally go to the government and the national party, the CNO, for all that they have done so far for the Dudum people. In a rapidly changing world like ours today, the needs of Dudum people, indeed the needs of any ethnic group in the country, keep on multiplying.

‘In as much as we appreciate what the government has done for the Dudum man, we would still like to put before you, Mr. D.O., some of the pressing needs which are our main pre-occupation today. Before we enumerate them, Sir, we would like to ask you to be patient in your characteristic way. Our welcome speech may sound boring, so we apologize in advance for this.

‘With fourteen primary schools and a total enrolment estimated at over seven thousand pupils, Dudum sends out about six hundred pupils at the end of every academic year. Unfortunately, owing to high fees in post-primary institutions and long distances, only a few of these youngsters enter college each year. We therefore appeal to the D.O. that in order to enhance the future development of this area, a post-primary government institution be opened in Dudum (*Applause*).

‘We thank the government for encouraging the growth of such cash crops as coffee, cocoa and oil-palm. However, we notice that the existing nurseries in Dudum do not meet the pressing demands of our farmers. We would appreciate government effort to open more of them. In view of the current scarcity of beef on our market, we appeal to the administration to make the conditions for obtaining loans less exacting so that our graziers, benefiting from such loans, can increase their stock (*Applause*).

‘Diseases continue to plague our people, and the harsh conditions of our area do not make it possible for them to travel out in time to consult a doctor. We would therefore appeal to the Government to provide us with a hospital in the nearest future (*Applause*).

For some reasons we would like a police post to be established in Dudum. By asking this we do not imply that there is much crime in the area. We believe that the creation of a police post here would go a long way to serve the people in matters relating to personal security. Besides, the identity cards of most people in Dudum are expiring. And considering the long procedure in obtaining or renewing a national identity card, one can only envisage the hardship imposed on an old father or mother who must travel to Mbambe to obtain one. We would also like a Post Office to be created in Dudum.

‘Mr. D.O., in travelling to Dudum today, you have undoubtedly noticed the deplorable state of our road. It would not be an overstatement to say that we are cut off from the rest of the country. And yet we are only fifty kilometres from Bamenda Town! We are near modernization, yet so far from it! We fervently believe that you will leave no stone unturned to bring us necessary assistance in this regard. Finally, Mr. D.O., supreme in the mind of the Dudum man is one desire: an administrative unit. If Dudum were granted a sub-division, we believe that most of our needs would be satisfied. We would like the administration to recommend Dudum for a sub-division (*Applause*).

‘Your long experience, Mr. D.O., your dynamism and high sense of patriotism convince us that with your technical services, the above problems entrusted into your hands will be promptly solved, seeing how much you have already accomplished within the relatively short time you have put in in this division.

‘Once more we thank you for the effort you have made to be here. We thank you for the kind attention you have given to our address.

Long live the Dudum people

Long live the Republic of Cameroon and its leadership.’

The short speech was greeted by an ovation. It was a good performance. Abaago beamed as he shook hands with the D.O. to whom he handed the copy of the speech. Some of the people gathered there, being illiterate or barely literate, were amazed. Though they gathered little from the speech, they were nevertheless bewildered by what they thought was an incredible performance. They were now convinced that Abaago was, indeed, the speaker of *Ukara*. This was one of his greatest moments. He walked into the

grandstand as though he had springs under his archaic pair of shoes. He was the day's happiest man. The drawn-out applause died down when the D.O. got onto the podium to respond to the address through an interpreter.

'Thank you for your well-worded address. I must confess that I'm flattered by what you have said about me and the government. There is one word which, to me, best describes your entire address: maturity. The Dudum man is mature. I'm very glad about this. From your address I deduce that you are united. You are the unique people that you are, with a singular culture and a common destiny which you are now condemned to shape. This is quite in line with the principles of our national party, the CNO. It is my wish that you will now embark fully on the self-reliant development which you've been carrying out. This too is equally in line with government policies on self-reliant development. Do not misinterpret me. I do not mean that the government will abandon you to your own devices. Not at all. I mean that the government would first like to see concrete proof on your part that you would like to develop your area. When there is evidence of this, development grants-in-aid will be channelled to you through the Department of Community Development in Mbambe.

I have heard all your demands and needs. Let me publicly assure you that as soon as you show proof of your dynamism, as soon as you show proof of co-operating with the administration and abandon your previous questionable ways, my administration will be ready to consider most of your needs. Let me also disclose a secret to you concerning the major request in your address. In fact, unknown to you, the government had been considering creating an administrative unit in Dudum. The idea was suspended when the recent crisis broke out. You see what you would have been now had you not been quarrelling? Nevertheless, you still have a chance. Only demonstrate your maturity at all levels of activity, and what has been planned for you can still be yours; or else it may slip away. Thank you.'

The D.O. was warmly applauded as he came down the podium and resumed his seat in the grandstand. Then Abaago announced that the people should go back to the different corners of their dance groups. There now arose a pandemonium on the field as the D.O. went round to watch the traditional dances. He was

accompanied by the chiefs and politicians. All musical instruments were alive: gongs, drums, horns and rattles. The dancers sang and clapped. Gunshots were fired above the heads of the dancing masks. The Bonanyang women's dance was one of those that pleased the D.O. most. These women were virtually naked except for raffia-fibre skirts around their waists and rattles around their ankles. They were famous in Dudum for their *Akama* dance. They trotted as if they were kicking the ground and in the process, thrust their heavy posteriors behind defiantly, their uncorseted breasts falling in a half-swinging manner. It was captivating to the D.O. and his group. They also watched the *Ichibi*, *Adene*, *Ingua*, *Akara* and *Asondere*.

When they had watched all dance groups, the highly thrilled D.O. and his entourage, accompanied by the traditional rulers and politicians, moved into the courthouse. Of course Achamba, dressed in a well-cut blue suit, a white shirt and a blue tie, was among them. There the D.O. held a working session with the authorities of the area. It consisted mainly of questions and answers. The sensitive land issue inevitably cropped up, and the D.O. gave his final word on it. He informed his audience of recent government land policies.

'The government is sick and tired of the sporadic skirmishes due to land dispute that spring up in some parts of this province. It cannot sit by idly and watch the costly gains of the second republic undermined by senseless village conflicts, no matter their alleged origins. Consequently, it had decided to act rapidly in such matters. It may interest you to know that a few belligerent villages in some divisions have already been victims of government's new tough stand on land issues. Unfortunately, now, the turn is yours.

'According to recent policies contained under the section on Land Reform Act, any piece of land that threatens the basic peaceful co-existence of party militants at village, sub-divisional, divisional or even provincial levels, should automatically be expropriated by the administration. In application of which promulgation I have been charged with the responsibility of confiscating the controversial Ukob. It hence-forth becomes government land until further notice.'

The Dudum people received the devastating piece of news with shock and dismay. Ubeno raised his hand and was called to speak.

'Mr. D.O., the piece of land in question no longer poses any more problems between us. According to native law and custom,

we the Anjong people have won judgement over Ukob. It is only the recalcitrance of Akan that has brought this into question. The judgement had long been decided in our favour.’

‘Who passed the judgement?’ asked the D.O.

‘The Squirrel,’ replied Chief Akaya, ‘the age-honoured impartial judge.’

‘The Squirrel? Who do you mean by the Squirrel?’ pursued the D.O. curiously.

‘Just a squirrel. The simple animal of the size of a rat,’ put in Abaago in a tone bordering on derision.

The incredulous D.O., who sat dumfounded, felt he was being ridiculed. Was this madness? Were these people making a fool of an authority?

‘Squirrel? What for goodness’ sake are you talking about? I haven’t come here to be trifled with. I hope you are not joking.’

The D.O. looked scandalized. Ubeno quickly stood up and allayed his fears.

‘Mr. D.O. we are sorry to cause you some worries. According to our tradition, we return to the Squirrel for ultimate justice when we are faced with a case that presents particular difficulty. If two people quarrel over an issue, one must present a live Squirrel to justify his claim. A live Squirrel so presented is a clear proof of the honesty of the person. This is what Anjong has done, but Akan has failed to produce theirs. So we in Anjong regard the piece of land as belonging to both Anjong and Akan, whereas Akan feels that Ukob belongs to them alone.’

‘But on what logical grounds do you give implicit confidence to such an animal?’ asked the D.O.

Ubeno was once more up. ‘We cannot defend this on scientific grounds because our great grandparents never left us any records. But it was a system practised by them, and we ourselves have used it, and it works. The lack of records made us by-pass the customary court in Anjong in favour of a native authority: the Squirrel.’

The scientific and logically-minded D.O. who, after laborious years in the National School of Administration, had not come across such an interesting judicial system, now sat a little bemused. He had been well-grounded in traditional law and custom, but as far as ‘Squirrel’ was concerned, he had heard nothing. He nodded, as if to

say that he had broken new ground. He had an interesting case to investigate and write in detail about, a good seminar paper, perhaps.

All this while Achamba had deliberately maintained a low profile. He feared wounding the feelings of any of the parties. But when he read the emotions on the D.O.'s face, he was forced to speak. He had to say something, neither for Akan nor for Anjong, but in favour of the age-old practice. At least, he thought, there was something to be said about a system that had helped to bring a quarrelsome people to live in peace in the primitive past.

'Permit me, Mr. D.O., to say a word or two on this topic. I agree with you that there is little logic and no science at all in support of our traditional judicial system. I also agree that it's a primitive one. But before one condemns such a practice outright, one ought to reflect for a moment on a system that has helped to reconcile aggressive neighbours in the past. God was not stupid, in my opinion, to create such a weak animal like the squirrel to serve my people in such a vital way. Considering the nature of man, could there have been a better way of resolving my people's disputes in a period several centuries back? In any case which is better, an incorruptible Squirrel or corruptible man?'

The D.O. felt the bite of Achamba's speech.

'Well, thank you young man for your comments. They are reasonable and quite in order. But like I said earlier the case can be considered closed since the land in question is now no man's land until further notice. And let me seize this opportunity to warn potential trouble seekers that government has the means to deal with any fellows who disturb the peace of a community.'

'Let me also make it abundantly clear for those who may still be harbouring doubts about government's determination to put an end to this issue. You should all know that government and government alone is the custodian of all national lands, the national territory. The only way an individual or community can lay legitimate claim to a piece of land is by showing a land certificate. And none of you has anything of that sort to justify your claim to Ukob. According to recent land legislations and ordinances, only a land certificate duly issued by the Department of Lands can be the symbol of your legal right over land.

‘And so long as you possess no land title-deed, you are merely flirting with fire. You might have been behaving ignorantly, but know that ignorance of the law is no excuse for an offence. I’m not a legal authority but only an administrator charged with the responsibility to ensure peace in the area under my jurisdiction.

‘But it is as the Divisional Chairman of Land Commission that I have been empowered to place, on behalf of the government, the injunction I have just spoken of. Ours is a state of law, not anarchy. When, in the future, the injunction will have been lifted, you may then seek redress, or legal advice on what to do to own your land. As for your ‘incorruptible judge’ the Squirrel, recent legislation is silent on that. In any case this issue can be considered closed so long as the injunction remains effective.’

The act of government seizing Ukob or, rather, placing an injunction on it, was a blow to both disputants. But since it was shared shock, and a temporary measure, since it meant that no side would hence-forth take undue advantage of the other over the disputed land, the injunction was swallowed with more acceptance than if only one party were deprived of Ukob.

To Achamba it was a political expedience without a human face. True, it would bring about a relaxation of tension in the area, but it would not drive away hunger from those affected families with farmland at Ukob. Besides, the injunction failed to address the fundamental issue linked to Dudum tradition with regard to the age - old judicial practice, treated with levity by the D.O.

For, unless a government, no matter its avowed concern for the welfare of its citizens, undertook to examine seriously and with equity the problems plaguing them, in the light of the practice of both modern and traditional legal systems, with a view to finding a lasting and final solution to the issues, any temporary measures, like the injunction, would be nothing more than just that: temporary measures. And when these measures were allowed to go on for too long without an acceptable solution in sight, trouble was bound to erupt sooner or later.

After everything, Achamba thought that temporary or not the injunction might well be the price to pay for recalcitrance. For did not one of their popular sayings state that when two brothers fight over a woman, a stranger might come in and walk away with the coveted beauty?

Akan and Anjong disagreed over Ukob, a source of occasional conflict between the two, with potentials for greater conflagration. In the circumstances government's intervention, through an injunction, was thus a necessary evil, its short coming notwithstanding.

The D.O. was then entertained, and later on he left for Mbambe, but only after the Akan people, at Abaago's instigation, had presented him with three goats, six cocks and three tins of oil. To those who suspected his intentions, Abaago said that a 'big man' could not visit an area like Dudum and go away without anything that would make such a visit memorable. But he failed to persuade the D.O. to visit Akan on that day. The D.O.'s excuse was that Akan was not on his itinerary, but he expressed the wish that he might do so in the future. Mr. Mokoli was very satisfied with his role as a successful trouble-shooter in the Dudum crisis, at least for that period.

Chapter Seventeen

Akan believed they had scored a political victory over Anjong after the D.O.'s visit. Down there Abaago was considered a hero. He had always been their hero, but his prestige was further enhanced by the welcome address he had read. To the Akan people this meant that throughout Dudum, Abaago was the only person capable of addressing a foreigner in the high-sounding white man's language. They would not believe that Abaago was simply lucky after all, or that Ubeno could have read it just as well. They equally attached much importance to the gifts presented to the D.O. by Abaago, a situation that would be exploited in the future.

When Abaago went to the provincial headquarters to arrange for a commercial Land rover to visit Akan for the first time, he was not disappointed. He hired an old but strong Land rover. Before he left for Nkoman, he had arranged how Akan people would come out to receive the vehicle. He told all of them, especially children who had not yet seen any lorry, to come to Akan market on that day, and that oil traders should bring a lot of oil to the market to sell to the many strangers who would be coming from town. And they did.

The market was overflowing with people by the time Abaago arrived with the Land rover. It was half-full, with the politician conspicuously sitting by the driver and waving to the cheering crowd that lined up most of the newly constructed section of the road. In the 'owner's seat' Abaago, with a grin for everyone, looked like a man of the people.

He spoke in the market, praising the Akan people's effort and exhorting them to go ahead from victory to victory. 'Is this not what I promised you?' he asked. 'Now that our area is open to the outside world,' he went on, 'other projects will be accomplished. What we

need is just a little work. Give me just a bit more of your effort and we'll go places; we'll move mountains. Our village will outstrip Anjong in terms of development.'

As Abaago addressed the people, the driver of the Land rover stood near him smiling. Holding the latter's hand up, Abaago added, 'It is thanks to this gentleman that we're proud of having a car in our market today. And no matter how many more drivers and cars will be coming to Akan, this driver will go down on record as the one who opened the way for the others. He'll go down in history as the first and, therefore, the greatest.'

Now that Abaago's promise had come true, Akan people were ready to give him their support for any other development schemes he proposed. Thus when he told them that the proposed administrative headquarters for Dudum would be in Akan, they took his word seriously. Everyone looked forward to that day with excitement: all of Dudum coming down to Akan for the solution of any problem of administrative nature! They were ready to shed the last ounce of their energy to develop their area.

Anjong people were not blind to what was going on in Akan. They had seen the Land rover that passed through their villages down to Akan and were aware of Akan's development strategies and Abaago's machinations. Abaago had bribed the D.O. and heaped gifts on the first driver to Akan. To the Anjong people his crafty moves were nothing short of an attempt to court the favour and support of outsiders, with an eye to a sub-divisional headquarters in Akan. Ubeno warned his people that they might be taking Abaago lightly, only to be surprised by the turn of events. He told them that even though geography was in their favour, they should not remain idle, hoping that manna was going to fall to them from heaven. They should therefore show proof of their own dynamism and the will to develop.

Thus the Anjong village, indeed Upper Dudum, went out to carry stones and sand for the possible transformation of the postal agency into a Post Office, and the health centre into a hospital. They worked so hard that after only a few weeks, huge heaps of stones and sand were all over Nyebea. The Feg provided more than enough sand. Heaps of sand lined up the sides of the river.

Meanwhile Ubeno had a large map of the Dudum clan area drawn in indelible paint on a large piece of plywood. It was well-framed and put up in the form of a sign board at the junction at Nyebea, and destined to serve as propaganda: the publicity of the centrality of Anjong vis-à-vis the rest of Dudum. Predictably the map aroused the wrath of the Akan people. In their hearts they admitted that Anjong was the most suitable centre for Dudum, but had not the moral courage to say so openly. They therefore hated anyone who claimed that Anjong was an accommodating village.

Thus hardly a week after the map had been put up, the Akan people dramatised their anger: the map was discovered missing one morning. After a long search some Anjong men found pieces of the shattered board in Lower Feg around Iteubugi. The response from Anjong was more determination and more maps. More maps were hastily drawn and displayed in several strategic places in Anjong including Nyebea and the frontage of Back-to-Land. All Dudum villages were well-marked out, with Akan at the extreme south. Anjong was in the centre while the other villages were dotted around it. Strangers to Dudum read the story of the area from those maps, which advertised the suitability of Anjong as a possible capital for the clan.

Chief Akaya remained faithful to his word. He returned whatever items he had taken as dowry on Echunjei: Everything that Ekunidi or his son Eziaga had given to any member of Akaya's family was refunded. Akaya assured Ekunidi that they would still be friends.

Ekunidi and his son were satisfied. Eziaga had recorded everything spent on Echunjei in a blue-cover exercise book titled: 'Dowry on Echunjei.' It contained the names of all important members of Echunjei's family, and against each name was the share of the dowry the person had taken. All cash, goats, and fowls, all tins and calabashes of palm oil, all bags of salt and bars of soap, all of these were recorded in the exercise book. But Ekunidi, who belonged to an older generation and was illiterate, preferred his counting sticks, and bamboo splinters. He had, for example, bamboo splinters well-cut and tied in small bundles of ten, with each single

splinter representing a goat or a pig. He buried them among the blackened logs of wood and kernels in the ceiling. Cooked food and calabashes of wine were, however, ignored. One could never tax a person for food eaten in one's house. It was part of one's social obligation to entertain one's guests. Thus items like cooked food and wine were never really counted as legal items of dowry.

A week after he had returned from home, Achamba received a letter from Echunjei. It was a letter unlike the previous ones, a letter that came closer to the type he had hoped to receive from her. She must have had a rough draft of it before copying it out on an entirely new sheet, or else she had taken her time and care to write it out directly, for it carried neither scratches nor cancellations. The handwriting was neat from the first to the last line. Achamba went through the missive with great interest:

Dear Mr. Achamba,

How are you and your work? Hope you're doing fine. As for me I'm a bit okay.

Thank you once more for the novels and the post-card. I've finished reading them and I enjoyed them very much. My friends admire the beautiful card also.

I appreciate the concern you've shown me and my studies ever since I came to this college. Concerning my Easter holidays I'll be spending them with my parents at home.

*Bye,
Yours Echunjei*

He gave a caressing touch to the blue sheet. Then he went through it again three more times, savouring every word and expression. And when the excitement over the letter had cooled off, he picked up his pen and made her a reply to which he appended a short poem:

Dear Miss Echunjei,

Thanks a lot for your note. It was a beautiful letter.

I'm very well except for so much work since we here are faced with the problem of managing large classes. For example, the smallest of my four classes has exactly 73 students. This means a great deal of work for one who teaches English and Literature. You can then imagine how many exercises and essays I have to correct every week.

I'm glad you found the novels readable. I hope to be at home during Easter too, and may be we'll meet at the students' meeting.

Good luck and success in your exams. But don't work too hard. Here's a sonnet for you:

HER SMILES

*When Echunjei's smiles change dull Septembers
Into joyous and fruitful Decembers,
Then the pangs felt in the rainy season
Are healed by the balms of the dry season;
So birds, beasts and men who have been hiding
From the season's roughness come out singing,
To praise God, everyone, for His kindness
In changing dullness into happiness.
Who, unless a dead man, can fail to feel
This important change with much hope and zeal?
That is how my heart feels when your great hips
Coupled with those smooth and delicious lips
Drive away all darksome clouds from your face
And dress it with a cheerful look of grace.
Achamba*

Achamba conducted his class tests earlier than usual so as not to delay as much as a day in school after the official closing date. He had a lot to do during the upcoming holidays. First, he would rush to Yaoundé to consult the National Archives for any light on the question of chieftaincy in Dudum. Then he would return home to address the students as well as his people, especially to take their emotional temperature after the D.O.'s visit.

Thus as soon as schools broke off for holidays, Achamba wasted no time. Before seven in the morning the following day, he was already at the Nkoman motor park to take a bus for Yaoundé. He got on to a bus, and although it was already full, its departure was delayed for about an hour. This was due to an argument between a uniformed gendarme officer and a magistrate. They were quarrelling over a front seat. The gendarme, as everyone expected, wanted to sit by the door while the magistrate, who refused to be hemmed in

by the driver and the officer, said it was his right to sit by the door since he had arrived there first. Both were English - speaking, but the gendarme, noticing that the magistrate was not as bilingual as he, decided to address him in French. Knowing that he would be losing the battle if he continued to speak in his halting French, the magistrate took shelter in his authoritative English. The gendarme spoke to him in French, and he replied in English, barely grasping the meaning of all that the officer said in his fluent French.

'I repeat, Mr. Gendarme, that I came here first and I shall sit by the door and nowhere else. If you like, pass and sit in the middle. But if you think that I'll shift an inch from here, you're deceiving yourself,' declared the magistrate as he adamantly remained planted in the disputed seat.

The argument dragged on, and the passengers in the main section of the bus became impatient. They hurled insults at the magistrate who, to them, was completely in the wrong, because that strategic seat was invariably occupied by a military officer travelling; unless there was none. With a gendarme in the front seat, they were sure of not being harassed at road-blocks or checkpoints by other officers. While the young officer went out of his way to show some softness, the magistrate remained relentless.

'What does he think he is?' asked a passenger.

'Magistrate my nose,' put in another. 'If he claims to be a magistrate why shouldn't he drive in a magistrate's car? If he's too big to sit between people he should buy his own car.'

Despite pressure from park boys and other drivers, the magistrate remained implacable, and at the end the gendarme agreed to sit between him and the driver to the surprise of most passengers. He made a favourable impression on those around and was more respected than the elderly and more learned man of law.

But if the magistrate expected to have an easy journey to Yaoundé on that day he was wrong, for at every road-block he was the subject of comments and insults. The first checkpoint where the bus stopped was at Mbouda. The gendarmes on duty were scandalized to find their colleague squeezed between the driver and the judge.

'Mais dis donc, c'est quoi? Depuis quand dans cette république?' asked one outraged officer, staring incredulously at the magistrate.

The young gendarme replied that he should not worry; he had willingly accepted to sit there.

Non, ce n'est pas possible, tu dois occuper la place d'honneur. Il ne faut pas nous souiller la profession.'

But when he heard that the Monsieur had defied all appeals to him to sit in the middle, the controlling officer was even more furious.

Mais chef,' he addressed the magistrate, *'qui êtes-vous?'*

'I don't understand French. Speak to me in English,' replied the magistrate.

'Quoi?' asked another enraged gendarme who gave the magistrate a slap on the face.

But the humiliated magistrate was not a coward. As he was about to retaliate, another gendarme gave him a stroke on the head with a military belt. The victim winced and cursed. The young officer intervened, pleading with his colleagues to leave him alone. But the magistrate continued to be insulted and assaulted as they passed more checkpoints.

When they got to Ndikilimiki, all passengers except the magistrate went down. The dusty and hungry passengers scrambled for cooked bush meat and other tasty food items for which Ndiki was famous. They ate and drank and got on to the bus once more. The magistrate lost appetite and secretly wished he had reconciled with the officer right back in Nkoman. It was too late and humiliating to do so now. He was oppressed by the thought that his ordeal was far from over; they had done only half the journey. The remaining half would be unbearable. So at Bafia he got off the bus and declined to continue the journey on the pretext that he intended to visit a relative. As the bus took off, abandoning him, the passengers jeered at him.

'No, don't stay here. Come up and sit in the magistrate's seat. Come and take your place Mr. Big Man... Magistrate minus car.'

Though he had got off at Bafia, the magistrate was the topic of conversation for the rest of the journey. The passengers dropped the topic and picked it up again several times. It apparently shortened a journey that could otherwise have been boring. The commuters arrived in Yaoundé in a good mood.

Achamba took a taxi to Melen where one of his friends lived, and the following morning he went straight to the National Archives. He was told, *'Repassez le soir à partir de quatorze heures trente.'* He

went away and occupied himself usefully by visiting friends and the imposing Ministries. At three o'clock in the afternoon he was once more at the archives only to be told again:

Il faudra repasser demain matin à partir de huit heures puisque le Directeur Général n'est pas là. Il vient de sortir.' Achamba was visibly annoyed, but he managed to contain his anger and went away.

In the evening he paid a visit to the Dudum people in Yaoundé, persuading them to save money for the development of their area. He informed them of the D.O.'s visit and of the different development projects Dudum people at home had agreed to embark upon. It was only through self-reliant efforts that Dudum could rise from obscurity. Achamba also exhorted the younger generation working outside the clan to unite for the common good of the area despite the disorder at home, and to remember that it was the place of the enlightened sons of Dudum to go home from time to time and preach unity. He announced that a general meeting of all Dudum people at home and abroad would be held sometime in the near future. The Yaoundé group should be prepared to be represented by a strong delegation.

The following day, when he returned to the archives, he was more successful and was given a little form to fill out. When he had done so, he was led into the impressive but musty building whose walls were lined with high cupboards that carried huge, dusty files and volumes. The volumes were labelled according to the provinces of the republic. Achamba went straight to those of the North-West Province, brought down one, and turned to the index where it did not take a long time for his roving eyes to land on 'Dudum'. He hurriedly turned to the pages, and then had a world of facts in front of him. Just as Neba had said, what Achamba read was almost unbelievable. Most of the reports were written by British sociologists, historians, and geographers; some of the articles were 'Dudum Progress Report,' and 'Intelligence Report on Dudum Clan Nkoman Division.' One report ran thus:

'The first Europeans to come into contact with Dudum people were the Germans. Dudum is made up of a cluster of villages with a common heritage. Though the basic organisation of Dudum has been the clan, it belongs to a larger unit known as the Widikum tribe. The Dudum people speak a common language, wear the same

type of clothing and eat the same kind of food. They live in the same kind of dwelling and have a distinctive culture. The clan offers the individual Dudum man social and economic security and regulates his life through tribal laws and customs so that he can live peacefully with his fellow clansmen.

‘Though the Dudum people are generally quarrelsome among themselves, they can abandon their differences and unite in the face of an external enemy. Such unity of purpose was evident in their determination to combat the Germans and the Tiba invaders as shown by records left by the Germans. For all their aggressiveness the Dudum people are hospitable and approachable.

‘Dudum at the moment is ruled by four main chieftains: Ebaichu of Anjong, Fon of Tin, Ichu of Akan and Utuah of Abebung. According to a German report there were originally only two chiefs in Dudum, namely Atianjoh of Anjong and Atong of Akan. Owing to its strategic location Anjong became the German headquarters from where the colonialists administered the rest of the clan. As time went on, however, Atianjoh became less dynamic and heavy-handed. Atong of Akan, on the other hand, showed greater administrative qualities. Eventually he replaced Atianjoh as the paramount chief, and Akan, for a brief period, became the German headquarters in Dudum. But the defeat of the Germans in the first World War put an end to German influence in Dudum. With the coming of the British in 1920, things changed once more. It did not take long for the British to discover that Anjong was more suitable for their purpose. Hence once more Anjong became the administrative headquarters of Dudum. Meanwhile the chiefs that had been ruling Dudum under the Germans had become old and inefficient. Consequently, the four above-mentioned chiefs were installed with Ebaichu of Anjong as the paramount chief of Dudum.’

Achamba took down some notes from the reports. He felt he had made a useful discovery, a historical break through. Two days later, he went back home very satisfied with his research: he had found the solution to one of the most divisive issues in Dudum.

Chapter Eighteen

Achamba and Abaago did not agree on the development strategies for either Dudum or Akan. As far as the development of Akan was concerned, Abaago was inflexible - Akan came first. This was only to be expected since Abaago was working energetically to have the capital of Dudum placed in Akan. On the other hand, much as he liked Akan and, indeed, any other village in Dudum to develop, Achamba, despite the natural bias for his village of origin, would not selfishly advocate Akan as the headquarters of Dudum. He saw that geography did not work in favour of his hometown.

While there, you had the impression that you were in a pit threatening to close in on you and choke you to death, a feeling that you were dangerously cut off from the rest of the outside world. That was the feeling inspired by the surrounding hills that nearly hemmed in Akan from the rest of Dudum. But as you got to Anjong from Akan, the opposite impression was uppermost in your mind. Places cleared up and the horizon appeared in the distance, an inviting openness that was all the more attractive for its sharp contrast with the bottle-neck aspects of Akan.

The differences between Achamba and Abaago were further deepened by the discovery the former had made in the National Archives. Abaago could not understand how a son of the soil could refuse to back up his people in a general effort that would bring light to them. In a conversation with Achamba, he became emotional over the issue:

‘If you oppose the development of your area, who do you expect to support it? You are the light and the people expect you to lead them.’

‘You’re confusing the issues,’ replied Achamba. ‘We’re talking about two things: the development of Akan and the development of Dudum as a whole. I support both. Indeed, you don’t doubt my enthusiasm towards the development of Akan. You yourself know that I’ve never missed any opportunity to help my people materially.’

I have often participated in the construction of our road; I keep on advising our chief and people on why we ought to live in a clean environment; I occasionally educate our youths on the importance of obedience and hard work; I did not fail to pay regular visits to our people who were imprisoned in Mbambe; and there was never a time I went there without giving them money; I'm a son of Akan, but I'm first of all a son of Dudum.

'Dudum is a clan, but Akan is only part of it. While I'm in favour of every small part of Dudum developing, I oppose any that carries out its own development to the detriment of the whole clan. Dudum is a larger entity than each of its components. I believe we should bury our individual differences when we think at the level of the clan. We should be united as our grandparents were when they faced the Germans and the Tiba people, and as we were when the D.O. came to Dudum recently. I think everything I have done shows that I'm as strongly attached to Akan as any other dutiful son of the soil. But where I disagree with you is on the issue of trying to persuade people that Akan is better than Anjong, in complete defiance of the facts of nature and history.'

'I'm simply shocked and ashamed to hear such words from you. What would an Anjong man say if he heard an enlightened Akan man like you?'

'I'm saying nothing but the truth. Yes, nothing but the truth. As an enlightened person, that's what I'm supposed to do: to tell people, to show people the truth, to be objective.'

'What truth? What objectivity?'

'Well, first answer me this, Mr. Abaago. Now give me your reasons for preferring Akan to Anjong as the central point of Dudum.'

'Haven't you heard that Ngiekum first settled in Akan from Widikum? Haven't you heard that at the time of the Germans Akan was their headquarters? These are my reasons. I believe that any development of Dudum should first consider the area, the village where our forefather first settled. And Ngiekum first settled in Akan, not far from Dudum Falls.'

'You're right that Akan was once the capital of Dudum. I have heard of it, but I have also read more about it than any other Dudum man. I read from the National Archives in Yaoundé that Akan and

Anjong were once capitals of Dudum at different times. But Anjong was the very first German post in Dudum before being transferred to Akan because the Anjong chief at the time was less efficient. But with the coming of the British, Anjong once more became the capital of Dudum. You then see that in order of seniority, Anjong really should be the headquarters of Dudum.

‘As far as our forefather is concerned, you’re perfectly right that he first settled in Akan. Every son and daughter of Dudum knows that. But why did all the sons of Ngiekum not settle on the hills here in Akan? Why did most of them have to go away from Akan to settle elsewhere to form fifteen villages as opposed to four down here? The answer lies in land on which to settle. Have you ever given serious thought to the idea of Akan being a modern capital of Dudum? Where, for example, can a Gendarmerie Brigade be built? The Post Office? The health centre, government secondary school and hospital?’

Their argument dragged on, with Abaago scoffing at Achamba’s discovery on the seniority of Anjong over Akan in terms of political importance. He challenged him to produce the document that stated such lies. In vain Achamba tried to persuade him. Despite the extent to which he went to relate all the details about his research in Yaoundé, he failed to dissuade Abaago from his own conviction that Akan and not Anjong had been the only German post in Dudum.

Abaago realised with trembling fear, like the kind that follows a nightmare, that Achamba was more of a threat than an asset to the Akan man. He would uproot all that Abaago had planted. He was a dangerous and traitorous person who had to be dreaded. Consequently, Abaago carried out a vigorous campaign against Achamba’s ideas, cautioning every Akan youth against being brainwashed by him.

The day for the Dudum Teachers’ and Students’ Meeting arrived, and though such an occasion did not call for any politics, local politicians found it necessary to attend. A handful of parents had been invited to the gathering which was held in the Anjong School

hall. Achamba, who had been chosen as one of the patrons of the movement, was already seated when the politicians arrived. He was dressed in a stylish, dark suit, a sky-blue shirt and a black tie. He noticed Echunjei somewhere at the far end of the hall. The President of the Association had spoken and many more speeches were made by officials of different delegations. After the first group of speakers, it was then Achamba's turn to address the assembly.

On the arrival of Abaago and, later on, of Ubeno, Achamba began to revise his prepared speech mentally. He managed, as far as it was possible, to alter a word or an expression here and there. Indeed, he even left out whole portions for the sake of avoiding a direct clash with any of the controversial figures, especially Abaago. Not that he had not suspected Abaago's possible presence. In fact he had drafted the first version of his speech assuming that Abaago would be there but, on second thoughts, had expanded it, adding more points, in case he did not meet any of the politicians, which was unlikely anyway. It was these sections that he began to delete, so to speak, when the man stepped into the hall. When he was ready, Achamba stood up to address the mixed group of parents, students and teachers:

'Dear parents, teachers and students, it is a pleasure for me to address you this evening. Thank you very much for the confidence you have in me in making me one of the patrons of your movement. My heart swells with joy when I see so many students in a large hall like this one. No one could have dreamt of such a heart-warming student population a few years back. This inspires a lot of hope for the future of Dudum. If you take a glance around the hall, you will notice, however, that although Dudum is making remarkable progress as far as boys' education is concerned, the number of girls in colleges is still lamentably small. This is a regrettable fact indeed.

'I thank the previous female speakers. They have spoken well on girls' education. I hope their commendable advice to parents and their daughters has been well-taken. You parents cannot say you love your daughters when you send your sons to be enlightened while the girls are sent into early marriages. There will be a time when the boys leaving colleges or universities will expect to marry only girls who must have had a certain level of college education. Who will be their wives if you don't send your daughters to college?

Your sons may be obliged to look for wives elsewhere, and to some people here this is a curse. But you can't blame the boys for looking for better educated girls outside the clan. The world is rapidly changing. Don't expect tomorrow to be like today. A new world comes with its numerous problems, and the men and women of tomorrow must learn to cope with them. The boys of tomorrow will no longer marry wives as uneducated as their own mothers of today. True, education is expensive, but ignorance is even more expensive.

'Dear Students, while at home you must help your parents. You should make them feel that it is good to send a child to college. You are the torchbearers, and as such you must teach the people at home basic hygiene and practise it first yourselves. Behave yourselves well at home and at school. Indeed, your good character will play a larger role than mere preaching like this in spurring parents to send more of your brothers and sisters to school. I decry the attitude in students who, when at home, put on airs and speak to illiterates as if everyone knew that H₂O and NaCl were water and table salt.

'You have been to different places outside our clan and seen what's happening in those areas. Put the good ideas you have brought from them into practice to foster the development of our own homeland. Help in the construction of the inter-village roads found in your quarters. The future of Dudum lies in your hands. You should avoid discrimination among yourselves because this will only help to pull us apart to our own disadvantage. You know the maxim - 'united we stand, divided we fall'.

'You certainly have heard of the historic visit by the D.O. to Dudum. That visit may produce a lot for us in the future if only we exhibit unity of purpose and oneness of identity. You are not unaware of the ugly quarrels that have polarized us for a long time now. You are young intellectuals, and it is not in character for an intellectual to let emotions get the better of him. Think coolly and objectively before you take sides on an issue. The state of affairs in our homeland is so potentially explosive that unless you the young ones are careful not to get mixed up in it, we may yet be torn to shreds. Stay off the so-called politics, and in your own behaviour demonstrate a spirit of unity, tolerance, and good will among yourselves.

‘What I’m saying equally holds good for teachers. I don’t however, mean that teachers should remain dormant. By their very nature they are to teach everyone, children and parents alike. But before a teacher gets involved in Dudum-village politics, he should examine his conscience to see that he is working in the best interest of the area as a whole, or I would rather wish he also kept his mouth shut. Because of his social position and the respect he enjoys among pupils and parents, a single teacher is capable of plunging a community into chaos or rescuing it from confusion. So teachers, watch your ways. You have within you the capability of either leading Dudum to its potential plenitude or into utter destruction.

‘As one of your patrons I pledge to you my complete support in your future efforts and meetings. I assure you that I’ll help in my own way to make this association grow from strength to strength. Long live the Dudum Students and Teachers Association. Long live Dudum.’

Achamba ended and there was a prolonged burst of applause. It was a speech that resonated well with most students, enthused by it. A few congratulatory comments on it from some listeners fell on Echunjei’s ears. She was exalted. It was equally an oration for which Ubeno would have liked to take credit. Achamba had clearly wanted to avoid the issue of the tension in Dudum but unfortunately, he only succeeded in dwelling on it. Once he had landed on it, he glided over it with the facility of a banana stem sliding down hill.

But in self defence, as he savoured the effect of the speech on the audience, Achamba then saw the folly of his previous effort to avoid such burning issues as had recently divided the Dudum people. How could he have addressed such a promising group without warning them to shun the dangers that threatened Dudum unity? But he had been true to his own advice. He had taken no sides and in an evangelical manner, had asked the Dudum youths to live above partisan interests.

Abaago’s speech, marked at every turn by personal sentiments, sounded commonplace compared to Achamba’s. Part of it was as follows:

‘A students’ meeting is not the right place for political indoctrination. The job of these young men and women is to learn, to study in school. Book and not politics is their concern. People shouldn’t stand up in such places as this to put dangerous ideas

into the head of irresponsible youths. Leave them alone and poison not their minds.' He sat down. There was no applause. Indeed some students felt slighted by Abaago's statements.

Ubeno shot up his hand and was called up to speak. In its lucidity and intellectual appeal, his speech was better received than Abaago's. Other speakers followed until it was about eleven pm, when it was declared that the dance should begin.

But whether it was a calculated move or a mere coincidence, Achamba could not tell, for he was asked to take the floor with Echunjei as his partner. Of course he was not alone. Other dignitaries were with them. Achamba and Echunjei were embarrassed, but they managed to hit it off. Their dancing was stiff and business-like, especially as they were conscious of curious eyes and the glare of the light. This little awkwardness lasted only during the inaugural dance.

Unknown to them as they danced, Achamba and Echunjei were the subject of spontaneous comments in some corners of the hall. Echunjei's beauty and personality were too conspicuous to go unnoticed. They sent many a boy into fantasies. 'Wow! Look at those legs, man! Look at them!' exclaimed a boy. 'I'd give anything to place my hands on those buttocks,' put in another. 'She has the most attractive bust I've ever seen,' added a third...

When general dancing started, they were less formal. For most of the time, they danced together. As they danced they succeeded in keeping up a conversation which was interrupted several times by the general noise and jostle. Achamba congratulated Echunjei on her brilliant speech, for she was one of the few girls who had spoken on girls' education. He himself felt gratified when she said that his own speech was very good.

He even felt happier when Echunjei asked him why he had not told her that he would be going to Yaoundé. To him that marked the beginning of some special interest in him on her part. Achamba apologized for not doing so and squeezed her against his body. He bought drinks for themselves, and when the hall became draughty, they went out for fresh air and sat on one of the flat boulders in the Anjong School compound. The subdued throbbing of Dudum Falls could be heard in the distance... *dim- dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim.*

Achamba hugged Echunjei, but hesitated to kiss her. He had been playing the gentleman for too long now. That important word has to come out this night: he must propose to her. There was every indication that she would not give him a negative reply. True, she had started off with wonderful ideas; she had flirted with things like celibacy and the hope of waiting for twenty years. But Achamba had come to realise that all this was pure dilly-dallying, a typical feminine subtlety: a female mask worn to put off impatient suitors, or to better study the more ardent and serious ones; it was a sieve of sorts, to separate the chaff from the grain, infatuation from real love.

For all his determination, however, Achamba could not muster courage enough to divulge the declaration to Echunjei. He skirted the issue with the care of a hunter about to pounce on a quarry.

'We've known each other now for a long time, Miss. I first knew you when you were still in Form I. That was nearly four and a half years ago, and you've been on my mind ever since. But I didn't really think about you seriously until you were in Form III. Your playfulness, quick wit and affability have intrigued me. Your ideas about life in some respects tie in well with mine. For example, your beautiful speech on girls' education contained from the first to the last sentence ideas which only a reasonable girl would have used. I believe if we were to work together for a long time our ideas might harmonize. And who knows, we may both find a solution to the aching problems of our clan. Miss Echunjei, I hope you know where I'm drifting to?'

'No, I don't.'

'I lack the manner to state what I would like to say. Well, for want of a better expression, Miss, I simply want to say I LOVE YOU. I want you to be mine forever... Please let me hear your reply,' he concluded, greatly relieved for bringing it out at last.

'Please Miss Echunjei. I'm waiting for your answer.'

'What answer?'

'The reply to my proposal.'

'It seems some people are experts only at speech-making. Is a proposal to be made to a girl? Didn't you tell me you were a champion of tradition, or were you just kidding?'

Achamba took the hint and was thrilled.

‘Please, pledge to support my choice when I see your parents formally. Promise to put in a word or two in my favour, My Love. Tell me you’ll do so, please.’

‘My parents’ decision is mine. I have nothing else to say.’

To say this was the happiest moment in Achamba’s life might be an understatement. He felt himself propelled miles sky-high. He was on the wings of Fancy, carried to the heavenly regions far from earthly cares. Achamba squeezed Echunjei and planted a kiss on her lips! It was ecstatic; it was intoxicating. He ran his fingers all over her back calling her romantic names. Echunjei coolly savoured the overflow of his emotions. When they returned into the hall, it was in the highest of spirits that Achamba swung about. His generosity knew no bounds that night. He bought drinks for friends. He was a happy man.

The following day Achamba felt great; he felt as if he could do just anything. He was bubbling with physical as well as creative energy. He sought for a way to celebrate or, rather, immortalise the previous night’s romantic victory.

He went back to an unfinished poem, a valentine he had been working on to send to Echunjei. But at the time he wanted to send her the poem, he had had a bout of malaria that had sapped the creative energy out of him. And so February 14 came and went with the poem incomplete. However, it did not matter much that the date had passed; the important thing, according to him, was the genuine feelings behind the poem.

He reworked the valentine, and then read it aloud to himself several times. But each time he did so, he found a word or a turn of phrase that sounded false or odd. This, he deleted or rephrased. And when he was fully satisfied with his imaginative effort, he copied out the final version neatly and delivered it to Echunjei on Anjong market day, two days later. He attached a brief note to the poem, asking her to ignore the date and consider, instead, the genuine feelings behind the poem, sentiments re-awakened and reinforced by her gracious disposition towards him at the students’ meeting. The final version of the poem ran as follows:

HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY

On this day

*When lovers feel great
To be loved and to be truly in love;*

*On this Lovers' day
When lovers young and old
Are united by the youthful
Spirit of Love
Moving all over the world;*

*On this very romantic day
When Venus the goddess of love
Is moving in hearts bound together
By her son's arrows,
By arrows from Cupid's bow,*

*Stirring and inspiring lovers to scribble
Words of endearment to beloved ones;*

*Oh yes, on this Valentine's day
My thoughts fondly fly to the shrine
Where lives my idol, my goddess,
Reminding her that the flames ignited
More than three years ago
Are still burning with as much
Power as when first set ablaze;
That the fuel's fountain is still full.*

*It could not have been otherwise;
The sweet girl I set eyes on
More than three years ago is just
As wonderful and gracious now as then;*

*She is just as beautiful and attractive
Now as then.
By the same token my love for her
Is just as constant as ever!*

*Happy Valentine's Day, Echu
Your only one,
Achamba.*

Chapter Nineteen

The first person to whom Echunjei disclosed the news of Achamba's proposal was her mother. It was during an after-supper conversation. Mother and daughter had been chatting on several topics, and Eziaga's name naturally cropped up. Ebito said Echunjei's father had sold some of his property in order to refund the dowry on her. When she mentioned Eziaga's name it was not with any more bitterness. Ebito had come to terms with the situation; she used Eziaga's name only as a lead-in to find out if Echunjei had any boy on her mind. She had only a few months to go in the college.

'Eziaga used to be a good boy, but you children nowadays hardly see what we adults see.'

'But that was your choice, mother. Your choice may not necessarily be mine.'

'Well, you rejected ours; but have you found yours? I mean you ought to think of marriage. You'll soon be leaving school. Know that a woman's worth is in her husband's house.'

'I know what our society values. I'm no longer a child.'

'Tell me if someone has said anything to you. A daughter should hide no secret from her mother. Tell me if someone had asked you a question.'

Echunjei thought for a while and then replied:

'Someone spoke to me the other day at the students' meeting in the school compound over at Nyeba.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he would be coming to see you people.'

'Who's he?'

'He's Mr. Achamba.'

'Who's that?'

'He's a college teacher at Mbambe, and the son of Embuta of Akan.'

'And when he spoke to you what was your reply?'

'What could I have said? I told him I'm not my parents.'

'But what do you say about him? Do you like the boy?'

'Yes, I do.'

'So he's your choice?'

'Yes, he is.'

Ebito sighed a little and tilted her head for a moment, thoughtfully.

'There's something odd in your choice, my daughter. Did you say that boy is from Akan?'

'Yes, I did. But what's wrong in that?'

'Well, you'll see your father. I don't know what he'll say about it himself. I don't know how he'll take it; you know the trouble in Dudum now. You aren't a child. Our people have been quarrelling with those of Lower Dudum for a long time now. Have you looked all over Upper Dudum and have not found a boy you can choose? The people down there are hostile.'

'I'm marrying a man and not his area. The area has got nothing to do with me.'

'I'll talk to your father about it.'

Ebito spoke to her husband about the proposal; she pressured him to use his authority to change Echunjei's mind. She felt uneasy about the choice, but Akaya would not give her any assurance. He called for his daughter.

'Is it true what your mother's telling me?'

'Yes, father. It is.'

'Are you really sure that he's the best man you would have as a husband? Have you thought seriously over the matter?'

'I have, father. I've thought it over many times.'

'Now, how long have you known him? Or did you only meet him at the meeting on *Njed*?'

'I've known him since I went to college; we've been meeting at students' meetings and in our market. At that time we had only ordinary conversations and he did not say anything to me concerning marriage. It was only the other day that he asked me the question.'

'Like your mother said, haven't you found any boy in the whole of Anjong, Abebung, Etwii, or Tinachong? I wouldn't like to give my daughter to an area that has been causing us trouble. Think over the matter, Echunjei. You are my heart and my roots; it will pain me very much to see you in misery. The people down there

will certainly look on you as the daughter of an enemy. You would not have left my side had nature not said so. Had I the means I would have changed your sex.'

'Father, it is difficult for me to disobey you. I've found no other boy whom I can love and respect. If there is any, it is Mr. Achamba. I would not be happy in marriage with someone I did not love. That was why I rejected Eziaga. If you people don't accept Achamba, then I'll not marry any other; I'll remain single. After all there are many girls I've met who are unmarried. I'll work and give you the money you would have taken on my head.'

Akaya was touched by this declaration, for Echunjei was serious. He propped his head with his left hand and thought for some time. That cannot be. His favourite daughter, indeed his favourite child, cannot remain a spinster all her life. Where in Dudum has that happened? What is money? I cannot converse with money. One can converse only with one's grandchildren.

Chief Akaya knew Achamba very well. Achamba had written him a letter congratulating him on his maturity and on his search for peace as opposed to Akan aggression. At the time of the letter, the chief had only heard of Achamba's name without having seen him. Their very first meeting was during the preparations for the welcoming of the D.O. and during the working session with the D.O. Akaya had been impressed by Achamba's selfless approach to the Dudum situation. It was Achamba who, single-handed, took the step of grouping the quarrelling factions to draw up a common programme for the D.O.'s reception. He was the main brain behind the drafting of the welcome address. For one who was a native of Akan, Achamba had shown extraordinary selflessness. Akaya and Ubeno had discussed him and both had great admiration for him. Children like Achamba were the types Dudum needed, and there was no doubt he was a great hope for Dudum. What if such a boy married his daughter? They were both book people and would suit each other well.

'I'll consider the matter. But did Mr. Achamba tell you when they might be coming here?'

'No, Papa.'

'I'm waiting for them. Let them come first. My final word is yet to be made on the matter. For the moment be calm and don't say anything about it to anyone.'

Ebito, *Abu* Echunjei, who all this while had been following the conversation silently, came in.

‘But *Ataa*, think of what some of your people will say about this. Some will not be happy with it.’

‘I know they won’t, but it’s none of their business. I’m the master of my household. No one but me can determine how I should rule my homestead. My daughter’s marriage is my affair and not theirs.’

Echunjei was happy but did not let her mother know this. Her father was on her side, and that was reassuring.

Meanwhile Achamba’s mother, *Abu* Achamba, was pleased to learn from her son that he had at last found a wife. The one-legged Embuta was equally pleased. His spirits were, however, dampened when he learnt that the girl in question was Akaya’s daughter. Not that he nursed any personal grudge against the chief. No. He rather dreaded the reaction of people like Abaago, for he could fairly predict how they would receive the news. Of late Abaago and the others had been speaking bitterly against him. Embuta knew just too well the feelings of some Akan people towards Upper Dudum.

‘This is good news, son. I’m glad that I’m still alive to hear of this. But did you say the girl is Akaya’s daughter?’

‘Yes, father, she is.’

‘I wish she were a different girl. If she had been a girl from Lower Dudum, she would have been a good one.’

‘Why father? You talk as if you’ve seen her. Who has told you that she is bad?’

‘No, you misunderstand my worries, son. What I mean is that the choice you have made will not please your people down here. That will only intensify their hatred for me or you.’

‘Why? I’m not marrying to please them, am I? What has their pleasure or displeasure got to do with my marriage? Have Akan and Anjong people not been intermarrying for ages now? Are there not many Anjong daughters down here and those of Akan up there? Is it only my own marriage that will be an exception?’

‘Times have changed, son. The devil you call ‘politics’ did not exist in our time. It’s a recent development, and it is at the bottom of some of the problems of Dudum. Dudum has never been threatened by so much disunity until recently. Your marriage to this girl would be ill - timed. The present climate of feelings is not in favour of it.’

'Well, I can put it off if you like; I can stay for a few more years before marrying. I thought I was doing this partly to please you. You people have been blaming me that I ought to marry. ut, listen father, if I postpone marrying now there is no guarantee that I 'll marry Echunjei again or any Dudum girl, for that matter. I can possibly marry outside the clan.'

'My ears are sealed. I don't want to hear any more. That will happen when I'm no more. But, my child, it is not that I'm opposing your marriage to this girl for its sake. It would not be good for both of you to live in a place where you are not loved.'

'I don't care a bit about that. By the way, we won't come to settle here in the village. We will be working outside like most of the other children, and come home only occasionally.'

The prospect that Achamba could put off his marriage for a few more years frightened Embuta. But the suggestion that they could marry and then leave home as they would certainly be working out of the clan was a way out. Embuta agreed that his son could go ahead with the matter.

A few days later Embuta sent three men with a calabash of raffia wine and a cock to 'open up a conversation' with Akaya's family. Achamba was among them, making a total of four people. Chief Akaya called for Ubeno and two closest members of his family when the people from Lower Dudum arrived. He gave orders to Ebito to prepare food for the visitors, and then he sent for his daughter. When Echunjei came in, he asked her if she knew the young man present, and she nodded. He dismissed her. Chief Akaya had earlier thought seriously over the implication of the event. After a great deal of reflection, he had arrived at the conclusion that delicate as the situation was, considering the tension in the area, the matter could possibly serve as a means of bringing together the two factions. And though it was hard for him to call it a political gamble, an expedience, it nearly was.

Akaya's group did not want to give the least impression that their daughter was cheap; indeed the reverse was true. They were tough, nearly too tough for Achamba's people. And they were right, for Echunjei was so far the first Dudum girl to soon graduate from college. There was no doubt that there were other girls, but they were all Echunjei's juniors. Akaya's men said they could not give

their daughter to aggressors, and the talks nearly broke down but for the wisdom and good humour of the elderly members of Achamba's party. They killed the cock brought by the Akan men, examined its testes and found that they were stainless. That was just to be expected. The girl was in full support of Achamba: so there was no reason for the testes to be stained. The testes having indicated that there was no major opposition from the central families concerned, the matter was settled. Echunjei's people accepted on a condition which Akaya's relative emphasized:

'Know that our daughter is not like any ordinary girl. You all know that she is a bookwoman. The money that has been spent on her can buy five women. This is to tell you that if you are ready to do battle with us successfully, you should first soak your cudgels in water; you should first feel the bottom of your bags. Of course, we don't mean that you are children with running noses. We have heard that your son here teaches in a big college in Mbambe, and receives his pay in a hat. The chief has recorded everything spent on Echunjei. He refunded everything that Ekunidi has spent on her. You are not the first people to come to us for our daughter. Many others have tried but failed. You all know Ekunidi. Be therefore prepared to return all that has been spent on your wife's education.'

Achamba's people replied that they were willing to carry out their obligation. They only asked for enough time to be given them. The day for the settling of the dowry was scheduled for the period immediately after Echunjei had completed school. They ate the food and finished drinking the wine. And when the two parties separated, it became official that Echunjei had been betrothed to Embuta's son. Thus Achamba and Echunjei returned to their different schools at the end of the holidays as fiancés.

Chapter Twenty

Most die-hards in Akan did not favour Achamba's engagement to Echunjei. While it came as a stunning revelation to some, others like Abaago were hardly surprised. Abaago had suspected it for long. To him Achamba's role as an appeaser in Dudum affairs had more to it than met the eye of an unimaginative man. His suspicions had further been given credence to at the last students' meeting where the couple had had a considerable amount of time together. Achamba had ingratiated himself with Akaya in order to marry his daughter. Like a traitor, Achamba was going to sell his own people for a common woman, a mere girl! Talking to Akan councillors gathered in Umeitoh's palace Abaago claimed:

'I have read Achamba's ways well. First it was when he openly condemned our part in the recent crisis in Dudum. Then at Anjong, just before the D.O.'s arrival, he had chosen the Headmaster of Anjong School to read the welcome address before that choice was rectified in my favour. Yes, Achamba, left to himself, would rather have preferred an Anjong man. Then recently he quarrelled with me over the chieftaincy issue in Dudum, claiming to be backed by authoritative information from Yaoundé, which he alleged states that Anjong and not Akan had been the very first colonial headquarters of the Germans in Dudum. My several discussions with Achamba have shown clearly that, like an ungrateful child, Achamba undoubtedly supports the so-called sub-division for Dudum to be stationed at Anjong.

'Councillors and Elders of Akan, since our main aim of meeting here today is to decide on what to do in the wake of this unholy alliance Achamba is attempting to form with our avowed enemy, I think I have this to suggest: there is a saying that one soiled finger easily contaminates the others. Therefore, to avoid the rest of our fingers being soiled, let's cut off the bad one. I suggest that we from today declare Achamba the enemy of Akan. We should have nothing to do with him anymore. Being polite to Achamba is like

incubating a rotten egg; it will come to soil you. Let us avoid even his one-legged father, for is it not said that a kid nibbles only the blade of grass eaten by its mother? For Achamba is only following his father's footsteps. Embuta has often shown coldness towards any measures we have adopted against Anjong.'

Chief Umeitoh then spoke and, though he firmly supported Abaago's suggestion, added:

'Councillors, I think Abaago has spoken as the conscience of Akan. I dare say he's spoken well. But I'd like to add just a little. I would suggest that we invite this erring child to a trial by the people before we ostracise him. Let us summon him before the Village Council. Though we know what his own side of the case is, let him tell it to us from his own mouth.'

It was thus agreed that as soon as he was at home, Achamba should appear before the Village Council. In Anjong the people's anger was as much directed towards Achamba as towards Akaya. Akaya was accused of being too yielding, ready to make concessions to the enemy. Achamba, Anjong said, being a native of Akan, had been working at the level of Mbambe to influence the authorities to condone Akan's atrocities in Dudum.

'He is certainly the person who prevented the authorities from punishing the Akan detainees. Who could have forced the D.O. to send gendarmes to Dudum to force us to attend Akan market but Achamba? And the proposed headquarters for Dudum which ought to be in Anjong has been delayed because such an Akan boy is in Mbambe, of course. And then to say that such a man after all these crimes against us is going to be married to a daughter of ours is really unbelievable.'

This was the common accusation made against Achamba. Thus a projected marriage that in a different community might have served as a unifying factor, in Dudum only threatened the unity of the clan. So far it had only served as one of the divisive issues to split the clan, another piece of faggot added to the bonfire to keep the flame alive.

But as the people's smouldering tempers were gradually fanned, behold a bigger and a more inflammable log of wood was thrown into the fire, so to speak, to increase its blaze: the proposed subdivision for Dudum had not only been put off again but had actually

been given to a different area - Buja. It was a terrible blow to the different parts of Dudum. Each saw in it the working of its enemy. For Anjong, it was clear enough: Achamba could not be in Mbambe and allow the headquarters to be sent to Anjong. Akan, for its part, claimed Achamba had purposely prevented it from being sent to Akan, for his own selfish reasons. They said he could not have envisaged a better gift to his father-in-law.

Anjong continued to criticize Akaya and the proposed marriage in the light of the latest event. In vain Akaya and Ubeno tried to persuade the people that Achamba might not necessarily be behind the giving of the sub-division to Buja. They would not listen. They kept insisting so much on Achamba's alleged machinations that, for a moment, Akaya's faith in the beleaguered secondary school teacher was almost shaken.

Rumours had it that immediately after the D.O.'s visit the Anjong people had made contact with the D.O., creating friendly links with him. They were said to have reacted because, they said, the 'rubbing of the D.O.'s mouth' was not the exclusive right of Akan alone, that generosity was not the monopoly of one village. According to the rumours Anjong said that what Akan could do they too could do it; for they were not only richer but they were in the majority: fifteen against four. Thus Anjong allegedly had gone up to Mbambe with tins of oil and goats to cement their newly created friendship.

Needless to say, Akan had done a similar thing. As for them it was a matter of reinforcing the links already created by Abaago. But they had carefully avoided Achamba. It was said that when the Akan men got to Mbambe, they went straight to the D.O.'s compound with their 'kola-nut.' So when the headquarters for which each village had been striving to court the D.O.'s favour had been given to a neutral area, each party could not help but conclude that Achamba had influenced the D.O.'s decision.

But Achamba was equally nonplussed by the news of the sub-division issue. He could not understand how the administration in Mbambe could be so high-handed. It was hypocritical. Promise a people one thing and do a different thing. He wondered what the D.O. thought Dudum people were. Did he think them fools to be thus exploited? No one could do that in the D.O.'s own native home town and go free. Yes, Dudum people were divided, but unless that

division was arrested by people like the D.O., Dudum would remain forever in their quagmire. Achamba saw in the D.O.'s lukewarm but clever stand the intention of maintaining the status quo for his own advantage. No. This state of things must change; the exploitation must end.

Two days later, Achamba paid a visit to the D.O. whom he met in his office.

'Good morning, sir.'

'Good morning. What can I do for you?'

'I'd like to discuss my area with you, please. I'm Achamba and I hail from Dudum'

'You teach in GHS don't you?'

'I do sir.'

'And I guess we've met before, am I right?'

'You are sir, and the last time was in Anjong.'

'Well, is there a way in which I could be of help to you?'

'I just thought I might need some clarification on the Buja Sub-division.'

'Buja Sub-division? I wonder in what way that concerns you. It's purely an administrative issue.'

'I'm a native of Dudum, sir, and I thought you had promised my people a sub-division when you were in Anjong.'

'Yes, I did, but what's your concern in it?'

'I don't know how my people at home will react when this piece of bad news reaches them. Since your last promise, they've been expecting this sub-division to be granted them. Now they will be disappointed in the administration here in Mbambe.'

'What do you call administration? Do you know what you mean by that word 'administration'? I alone don't constitute an administration. I am merely an agent of the administration, executing only such orders as are passed down to me from above, from my boss. I'm accountable to the governor and to the minister.'

'I know. But as the direct administrator of the area, you have direct contact with your subjects. You best know their problems and difficulties. You defend their interest, and it is you who must send reports about your administrative unit to those to whom you're answerable. Your comments on the people's needs are very important'.

'Young man, perhaps you think that a decision such as the one creating a sub-division in Buja is a one-man affair. It isn't. It comes all the way from the top, passing through the hierarchical set-up of the Ministry of Territorial Administration. It is not my decision. It carries the Minister's own signature.'

'Maybe I can't make myself understood. What I'm really trying to put across is this: that a ministerial decision doesn't just spring up like that. It is, as you've said, a culmination of a long administrative process which, in our case, takes its origin from the type of decision made by the divisional administrator. The decision of a man of your reputation, a man in whom government has implicit confidence, will play a larger role, because it comes from an expert who best knows his subjects. If you endorse what the people under you want, that favourable appreciation won't go for nothing. Your bosses will certainly approve of it.'

'What are you insinuating? Do you mean that I've not treated your people fairly?'

'No sir, I mean...'

'You mean what? The higher authorities are not necessarily bound by my reports. They can turn down my recommendations. They aren't under any obligations.'

'You misinterpret me, sir. I mean my people...'

'What people? Do you think the government has time with a bunch of war-like brutes like your people who can't even agree on where an administrative unit could be situated? The government is favourably disposed towards people committed to the cause of peace and unity. Your people are just the opposite. I'm not surprised at all with the creation of a sub-division in Buja rather than in Dudum.'

'One would then think, Mr. D.O., that a place as troublesome as Dudum should receive more attention. The administration could be brought nearer such people, the better to keep them under tighter control.'

Mr. Administrator, I didn't leave the School of Administration to come to the bush here to be taught the administrative craft by a classroom teacher who is unable to control a handful of teenagers. Know that we know what happens in this division and in your school. I've heard that you're becoming a politician to the detriment

of the children for whose interest you are here. Occupy yourself with your profession and let me take care of mine.’

Achamba left the D.O., who was still smarting from the hint of his double-dealing with his people, playing the role of a dishonest broker. For a second or two the D.O. felt frightened by the possibility of what intelligent fellows like Achamba could do. Such critical men must be watched. He arrived at the conclusion that Achamba must be transferred outside the division during the upcoming academic year. He must be got rid of. He was rather nosy, prying into matters that did not concern him.

But while the D.O. was mentally shaping Achamba’s fate, the latter got home and set about writing a serious secret report on the D.O.’s activities in Mbambe. In it he exposed the weaknesses of the D.O. in all his dealings with the people he had been called upon to serve. The D.O. was too conservative with old ideas which only helped to keep the area, especially the interior of the division, more underdeveloped. He was lacking in initiative and courage. He could not take a bold decision because he had got himself mixed up with the people, and would rather keep them at loggerheads, to better exploit them. Three years back the very D.O. had influenced local sub-section elections by publicly disqualifying voters for one candidate in favour of the candidate of his choice. It would be advisable for the authorities concerned not to keep such prejudiced and corrupt administrators in a division for too long. The authorities should send an impartial team of survey experts from the Department of Lands and Surveys to survey Dudum for themselves and get the best site for a possible sub-divisional headquarters for Dudum. Left to the present D.O. the earlier granting of the sub-division to Dudum would mean the end of his reaping where he did not sow.

The very day Achamba also wrote letters to Dudum people all over the country. The theme of the letter was development of Dudum; he invited them to a historic meeting of the elite of the area to be held in Anjong during the August holidays.

Chapter Twenty-One

Echunjei felt safe to spend the next midterm holidays with her fiancé. She had written him two letters within a short interval as against one of his. Achamba's lone houseboy and protégé spent the time washing and scrubbing the rough floor of his house and polishing the furniture. Achamba himself took charge of dusting the record-changer and radio-cassette on the central cupboard in the parlour. The photo albums, plates and glasses, the impressive bookshelf, and the wall pictures were in perfect order. His clothes had been ironed and neatly packed in the wardrobe, and the bed was well-made up. He placed a deodorant in the sitting room and another in the bedroom.

Neatly piled on a high stool in a corner of his bedroom were the past issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines he had read. Four more recent issues were still lying on a side-stool by his bed; he had not yet finished reading them.

The radio was blasting away, having been tuned, almost at full volume, to his favourite high-powered station, the Voice of America (V.O.A). Achamba reduced the volume. The programme on the air was 'News Round Up', involving V.O.A reporters scattered over some cities around the world. He knew virtually all the reporters' names by heart and loved listening to their velvety American voices and accent: 'This is Philomena Jury, V.O.A, Jerusalem... This is Charles Bartlett, V.O.A., Saigon... I'm John Blinsky, reporting from Kampala... This is Muhammed Suleiman, reporting from Lagos... I'm Christian Amanpour, V.O.A, Peking... This is Conrad Konglim, V.O.A, Phnompenh... And this is Tom Berry in Washington, Voice of America News....'

Echunjei moved around with the confidence of a girl certain that she and only she alone would take command over the house. It was with the same assurance that she went round executing a few household chores, an activity that pleased Achamba. But when the excitement of meeting each other had cooled off, when the romantic caresses had diminished, the couple settled down to other issues. Their minds turned homewards.

‘Have you heard from home?’ asked Echunjei.

‘No, not really, but I guess our people should be feeling bad about the latest piece of news.’

‘Indeed, they should. I heard it too in school.’

‘That was something that would have been granted to the Dudum people. But the administration here in Mbambe keeps tossing us about as if we were a football. So long as our people remain at loggerheads such a situation will never change. Unscrupulous fellows like the D.O. here will continue to take advantage of our people’s differences to keep us down and exploit us well. Many heads of goats have rolled, and tins of oil have flowed because of issues like the sub-division and the land dispute. Our people continue to vie for the D.O.’s favour.’

‘But are you sure of what you’re saying? Are you sure the D.O. himself is encouraging corruption?’

‘Why, I’m perfectly sure of that. I’m at his very nose here in Mbambe. We know all that is going on here. The store in his compound is full of goats, pigs and chickens, none of which he buys. I spoke to him the other day about his dealings with our people; I nearly called a spade a spade. Yes, I almost did.’

‘But Darling, be careful with such people. They may do you some harm if you tend to be inquisitive. Don’t intrude into his private life.’

‘What private life? There is nothing private about it. He’s here to serve the people, and it is in his capacity as an administrator that he dupes our poor people. They fawn on him. I nearly told him off. He’ll soon pay for his crimes against our people. He’s taken enough from them already.’

Echunjei thought her fiancé was perhaps going too far...

Then they compared the impressions of their different families on their intended marriage.

‘Some of my relatives laughed at me that I was leaving a more developed area like Anjong to go and marry in the bush.’

‘And what was your reply?’

‘I asked them how they expected the bush to develop if civilized people like me didn’t go down there to help develop it.’

‘That’s great, Love! A witty answer, isn’t it? I’m proud of you. Isn’t it strange how the older generation behaves? Can you imagine

that my parents would still like to make it their responsibility to look for a wife for me? But they aren't a serious obstacle to me in matters of marriage. Though I pay due respect to their counsel and opinions because they spring from pure love, I politely ignore them.'

'Do they hate me?'

'My parents?'

'Yes.'

'How can they hate a girl they've never seen? No, my parents don't hate you. Why should they? My father in particular admires your dad and has known him for a long time. What he rather feared was the present ill feelings between our two major villages.'

'My mother first felt like him. She also asked me to look for another boy from any of the villages in Upper Dudum.'

'Well, Darling, you know, as they say, the course of true love never runs smoothly. I guess it's so with ours. An idea occurred to me a few days ago, a happy coincidence indeed, in which our love might turn out to be a positive contribution to the situation back home. I wonder whether you've got what I mean.'

'You mean our marriage uniting two apparent enemies would help to reconcile our estranged villages?'

'That's right. Did the idea ever occur to you too?'

'Not really. It didn't occur to me at all, but I think before I left home recently, I overheard my father and Ubeno in one of their conversations hinting at such a possibility. I must add, though, that no powers on earth would have forced me to be so sacrificed had I not loved you.'

'Not at all, Love. I believe also that love must not be forced, and though it might be aided by friends and relatives, it must not be imposed on the interested parties by a third party. I myself love you for your own sake, irrespective of your village or family background. I'm now fully convinced that I would have married none but you, no matter from what corner you came. Now listen, Darling, whether for better or for worse fate has thrown us into each other's arms, and when fate calls, men must obey. I'm conscious of the fact that our two villages are larger units than two simple families; otherwise don't you see the beauty of our marrying to heal the wounds of the quarrelling villages?'

'I do. As you say, only two families would have been perfectly reconciled, with so many others, perhaps, opposed to them. Let's wait and see what the future will bring.'

'By the way, I've sent out letters to the elite of Dudum for a meeting to be held at Anjong during the long upcoming vacation. I think, Darling, that our children and grandchildren will never forgive us if we the young and enlightened generation of today fold our arms and watch the beloved legacy of our forefather, Ngiekum, torn to shreds by his headstrong offspring. We have an obligation to redress this situation. I've told every son and daughter who matters in Dudum affairs to think seriously on what ways we can rescue our rugged but beloved native land from the chaos towards which it seems to be steadily drifting. I 'll soon go to inform the traditional rulers and elders of the villages too.'

Two days later, Echunjei returned to Nkoman.

After his last interview with the D.O., Achamba acknowledged to himself that, unscrupulous as he was, the D.O. was right when he accused him of often abandoning his pupils. But he always made up for any lost lesson by giving his students an extra class or two to catch up. Though not a professional, he was a dutiful teacher. And though he felt it very much whenever he thought his pupils had been cheated, his consolation was the fact that he had always obtained official permission from his principal. He had never taken a French leave. His boss was obliging and understanding. However, in the light of the D.O.'s criticism, he decided hence-forth to go home only during the week-ends, unless there was an emergency.

During one week-end, he left for Dudum and when he arrived in Anjong, he was under family obligation to first call on his in-laws. He had bought a bottle of gin for the chief and some gifts for his mother-in-law. Akaya was glad to meet him again and thanked him for his 'wine'. He sent for a calabash of raffia wine which they both drank as they conversed.

'Have you heard from your wife?'

'I have, *Mbe*. I just received a letter from her saying she was quite well.'

‘What about the proposed sub-division for Dudum? What have your people in Mbambe done about it?’

‘I’m equally as surprised about it as you may be, *Mbe*. In fact I quarrelled with the D.O. about it. I told him he has deceived my people by helping to send to Buja what he himself claimed had been intended for Dudum.’

‘It’s interesting to hear that. I’ve been under fire from my people here that I’ve given my daughter to an enemy who has prevented the sub-division from being granted to Anjong.’

‘*Mbe*, let me swear to you that I’m in no way connected, directly, or indirectly with the sub-division being granted to Buja. How could I have been when I’ve been one of the preachers for the unity of Dudum? How could I have done it when I’ve fallen out with some of my own people in Akan over the suitability of Anjong for such a headquarters?’

‘I’ve always thought so too. Ubeno and I have always thought that there was something in you totally lacking in most of the Akan people. Whatever indignities I receive from my people, it’s purely out of the profound love and respect I have for my daughter. It is also partly out of the genuine respect and admiration I have for you. You are the son of the clan. Ten children like you in Dudum would make it a paradise. You are the kind of torchbearer we want.’

‘Thank you, *Mbe*. I was impressed to find lots of heaps of stones and sand at Nyebe already. Please don’t let the people relent. They should continue to work harder. We shouldn’t continue to live in the dark even without government aid. Last holidays in Yaoundé I discovered in government papers that the very first German headquarters in Dudum was Anjong before it was later on transferred to Akan and then back again. The details are in my file in Mbambe.’

‘I’m glad to hear that. This now confirms what I’ve always said though I lacked concrete proof. Indeed, my late father told me something to that effect, but since he died while I was still too young, I’ve come to think that those were confused childhood impressions. I’m pleased that history is on my side. Umeitoh has not ceased insisting that he ought to be the paramount chief of Dudum. I hope every Dudum man will come to know this one day.’

‘By the way, *Mbe*, I’ve written letters to all important sons and daughters of Dudum to attend a meeting here in Anjong during the long holidays. I hope you’ll inform the rest of the other lesser chiefs of Upper Dudum of this meeting. I’d like all Dudum people to come home and join hands to construct a better Dudum to see in what ways we can solve the various problems plaguing us, and to bury our differences.’

‘That’s a commendable idea. As far as my people are concerned, I can assure you that they will attend it. You know what I mean. The problem is to be able to persuade the people of Lower Dudum.’

‘Precisely, I’ve come just for that, I guess I must be going to Akan now, *Mbe*; I have only very little time to spend at home.’

As they had promised, the Akan people summoned Achamba to appear before the Village Council to answer treachery charges against him. He had been warned by his father of what was in store for him. Thus he had known that it would not be an easy session and had accordingly steeled himself in preparation for the encounter. The councillors were already seated when he arrived in Umeitoh’s palace. He entered and, in a humble and stooping manner, chose a place for himself and then, clapped his hands and the councillors joined him to greet the chief. Umeitoh barely acknowledged the ritual with a slight, majestic nod of his head and then signalled Abaago who stood up as spokesman. After an elaborate preamble, Abaago finally came to the point, reciting a litany of Achamba’s treacherous crimes:

‘Achamba, like the ungrateful child in the fable, has bitten the finger that fed him and also stabbed in the back the foster mother to whom he owes his very existence. Achamba, despite the pride the village has in him as an enlightened son of the soil, instead of bringing light to his people, has decided to keep them in the dark by actively influencing the D.O. not to send any sub-divisional headquarters to Dudum unless it was to be stationed in Anjong for his own selfish motives. Achamba has not stopped spreading malicious falsehoods about the alleged historical importance of Anjong in complete defiance of the oral history of our people.

Achamba, like his own wicked father, has shown nothing but contempt and disregard for his own people and any community project carried out in Akan. Achamba has, with no qualms of the conscience, sold his village, his own people for the sake of a woman.

‘Consequently, the councillors and elders of Akan, the very eyes of the people who met in the palace on *Ukie*, after seriously examining Achamba’s crimes, have adopted the following resolution: that unless Achamba retracts all damaging statements or comments he has ever made against Akan, that unless the said Achamba gives up immediately his proposed plans to marry Akaya’s daughter, that unless he does all this, the councillors, the voice of the people, will declare Achamba and his family unwanted persons in Akan.’

He ended and there was total silence, indicating the solemnity and gravity with which the whole trial was being handled. One or two people suppressed a cough somewhere in the gathering.

Chief Umeitoh then said, ‘Achamba, you have heard what the people have said against you. Retract your statements and clear yourself of the charges. Do as you have been commanded. The people are waiting to hear you speak.’

Achamba stood up:

‘*Mbe*, Akan councillors and elders seated here... the Village Council has overwhelmed me with so many charges that I hardly know where to begin; in fact I wonder if I can ever answer all. As far as my father is concerned, I won’t claim to speak for him. He might speak for himself if you judge it necessary. The Council says that I have never shown any co-operation in any community project, but to the best of my knowledge, I believe I have been as constructive as any other patriotic son of Akan. Some of you sitting here are my own witnesses. I have taken part in actively digging the road that links us to Anjong. It is true that I have not been as regular as most of you, for the simple reason that I have not always been at home. But none of you can justly say that each time I am at home, I have failed to turn up for any group work. Even when I was still in the secondary school, I directed groups of young people at the construction site. If this is not co-operation I don’t know what else it is. Not long ago our men were imprisoned in Mbambe, and I was of some help to them. The released prisoners themselves are my only witnesses. Do all these efforts show that I am uncooperative? Yet the councillors say I am.

‘Secondly, the Council says that I actively influenced the D.O. to send the sub-division to Buja. My best defence in this charge is my conscience. I am at peace with myself because I know beyond any doubt that I have done nothing of the sort. Perhaps the only person who can exonerate me will be the indirectly accused D.O. himself. We may be talking of serious litigation here. So the Council itself must be prepared to defend its source of information in this regard. On the contrary I recently had a bitter quarrel with the D.O. for granting the sub-division to Buja and not to Dudum.

‘As far as the original colonial headquarters of Dudum is concerned, let me now declare before the councillors, elders, and the chief that the government has it on record, clearly written out, that Anjong and not Akan was the very first German post in Dudum. Sometime later it was transferred to Akan, but with the arrival of the British, this was re-transferred to Anjong. Wake me up from sleep at any time in the night, and I will tell you that. That is the truth for which I am to die. I believe in truth before anything else. Were the facts against Anjong I would say so, not because I am a son of Akan, but in the interest of truth. And I would not shift my stand for anything in the world, not even at the risk of my neck. Thus I am falsely accused of scandalous falsehoods. I am not a liar.

‘There is no doubt that I am preparing to marry Chief Akaya’s daughter. There are many Akan people who have married the daughters of Upper Dudum and vice versa. I therefore see no reason why my own marriage should become a public issue. Marriage is a private affair, and I believe that no one in this modern time, not even my father, has a right to interfere in my marriage.

‘Then the Council claims that because of this marriage I have decided to influence the authorities concerned in favour of Anjong. Let me tell you, my respectable fathers, that my marriage connection has nothing to do with the old problems of Dudum. All of you know for how long the tension in Dudum has existed, and my marriage, a recent development, has not even taken place. No matter which girl I marry, that marriage will not change my convictions as far as the Dudum situation is concerned. Though I have never told any authority to send the headquarters to Anjong, I firmly believe and I am convinced that anyone with a sense of justice, would tell you that Anjong is most suitable as capital of Dudum. This I say

from a love of truth and justice, not from selfish marriage connections. Those who have building plots or houses at Ugum Town know that I have my own plot there too. But it is not because I have a plot and will soon start to build my own house there that I must defy my conscience and advocate a sub-divisional headquarters to be built in Ugum Town.

‘There are nineteen villages in Dudum and very few others are contesting Anjong’s natural suitability for a prominent role in the clan. Take our country for example. There is only one capital in Yaoundé, and no other town or ethnic group begrudges Yaoundé’s strategic location as capital of the republic. It is never possible for all big towns to be capitals. Before being Akan we are first of all Dudum people with a common ancestor, culture and destiny. It does not matter to me where the sub - divisional headquarters is situated, provided an accommodating site is chosen for it. All Dudum people will gain from it all the same. Akan is only two kilometres from Anjong.

‘My people, let me tell you that were it not for my intervention at the level of Mbambe, the authorities there might have dealt us untold blows. The gendarmes who came to force the Anjong people to resume trade with you would not have been sent if I had not gone and really pleaded for the stability of Dudum. I have failed in the past to change your attitude towards Anjong. But know that if you persist in your ways, the patience of the authorities is not unlimited. You will exasperate them, and they will resort to more brutal ways against you. You have tasted a bit of that already. Don’t ever tell me that I never warned you.’

A general muttering followed Achamba’s long defence. At this point the members of the inner Council including the chief went to confer outside while Achamba and the rest remained in. The elders were confused on what to do in the face of Achamba’s tough and even threatening stand. Some wanted the sanctions against him carried out, but others rejected this. Abaago was one of those who now advocated a softer stand against Achamba, for the fellow was likely to turn the tables against them. But they arrived at the consensus that Achamba had not yet given them a satisfactory response; so he should be given more time to reconsider the charges and frame a better reply. They said that was an opportunity for him

to mend his ways, and that when he was ready, he should inform the chief to convoke the Council again.

Achamba went away, satisfied with the defence he had put up to counter the charges against him. He was almost convinced that the Council's final words to him amounted to nothing but face-saving. He had seen defeat in their eyes, especially when he intimated litigation with regard to the Divisional Officer. It was only a matter of time, he thought, for those charges to be quietly dropped.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Not long after the creation of the Buja Sub-division, there was a nation-wide transfer of divisional officers. The Divisional Officer of Mbambe was sent to Fundong while that of Ndian was sent to Mbambe. A new decree stipulated that henceforth no D.O., would make more than two years in a post, a move which pleased the exploited areas; for one could not imagine the state of affairs in a division ruled over by people of dubious morality like the outgoing D.O. of Mbambe.

Abaago felt that the D.O. had played foul with him, and Abaago could hardly forgive him. He had gone up to the D.O. sometime after his visit to Dudum. With the support of his people, Abaago had carried more gifts to him. They had discussed the sub-divisional issue. Following a hint from the D.O., Abaago had mobilized his people towards greater self-reliant development in the hope that when the time came, any authority would support them, seeing that they were already ahead of the rest of Dudum. But the unexpected turn of events left him at a loss for words. He saw it as a breach of faith.

But the D.O. was in a fix. He could recommend neither Akan nor Anjong for the sub-division. Left to him, he would have proposed Akan except that he feared the opinion of the majority of Dudum people or of any objective superiors of his. As he saw it, if Akan could not be the headquarters of Dudum, then Anjong should definitely not. That was why, despite his pretended protestations to the contrary, the D.O. had proposed a neutral area, Buja, as a new administrative unit in Mbambe. He had taken too much from Akan to displease them with Anjong as the headquarters, and too little from Anjong to pour blessings onto them.

Achamba wondered whether the D.O.'s transfer was due to his secret report. After some reflection, he refused to take credit for what might not have been his own doing after all. It could have been a mere coincidence. But whatever the cause of the transfer, few regretted it. Nevertheless, he was satisfied that he had acted in the best interest of his exploited people.

It was not from selfish motives that he had written the report on the D.O. As an enlightened Dudum son, he felt that he owed his people a duty even if they never welcomed him with open arms. He had time and again rubbed shoulders with them because he firmly believed that it was his duty to help in any way to improve the quality of their lives. He had advised and informed them, even if his efforts were not adequately rewarded. But no one expected quick, positive results from an ignorant people. Achamba saw that his efforts alone were not sufficient, so he enlisted the help of all the elite of the area, especially those working outside the clan.

He saw that lack of education was the crux of the matter in the Dudum situation. If the attitude of the people was to be changed radically for the better, the inevitable tool for such a transformation was education in the best and broadest sense of the word. For the sad irony with Dudum was the fact that some of the people who passed for educated Dudum men were the greatest enemies of the area. The time was yet to come when real educated Dudum people would seriously think in terms of whole numbers and not fractions, of the entire clan and not villages. Achamba was yet to see Dudum men courageously stand above partisan tendencies and take bold but well-reasoned decisions.

Now very few were ruled by their heads rather than by their hearts; few could carry out dispassionate arguments or respect the feelings and needs of others; few exhibited any degree of imaginative insight into the consequences of their emotional outbursts. Because of the narrow-mindedness of some of his people, because of their selfishness, his well-intentioned handshake had been rejected by some, particularly the Akan people. But he would not give up the effort; he would keep on stretching out his hand to them, to all Dudum people. He was, however, not misty-eyed to be deceived into believing that the effort would yield immediate positive results. He would continue patiently, and his attitude would still be humility and tolerance, nevertheless showing firmness and fearlessness whenever truth was threatened by falsehood, justice by injustice, reason by passion.

Echunjei had completed her course and was awaiting the results of her certificate examination. It was then time for the young people to get married as planned. All formalities had been

carried out. Achamba, who had been preparing himself for the moment, first paid back, to the last franc, all that had been spent on Echunjei's education by her parents. The regular dowry was then settled. Apart from the negative reactions of those who did not even matter in the marriage, there was no serious objection to the match. Everything went on well. Even the ritualistic cock and kola-nuts were in favour of it.

As she was led to Akan that night, Echunjei adopted the usual wearisome tactics of a bride, extorting as much as she could from the relatives of the groom to satisfy her own female relatives who accompanied her. For the bridal party, the two-kilometre journey between Anjong and Akan turned out to be a much longer distance, indeed, owing to the snail's pace adopted by the bride that memorable night. Every few metres Echunjei would stop, refusing to budge until Achamba's relations stuck bills on her forehead or stuffed her hand with substantial coins, all of which she dropped into the eager palm of the intimate relation by her side. If Echunjei had to move faster, she had to be motivated; much money had to be given her, and frequently too. Her improved pace was thus proportional to the frequency at which an encouraging amount of money was released by Achamba's group. In this way the bride's relatives extracted a huge sum of money from the groom's kith and kin, and looked forward with excitement to sharing their hefty take the following day.

She was rubbed with palm oil when she arrived in Akan, and housed, following tradition, in the section of the building belonging to Achamba's mother, Ekiafang, otherwise known as *Abu* Achamba. The large group, armed with bamboo torches and kerosene lamps, occupied the vast courtyard. They spent the rest of the night performing the bridal dance, *Ingua*, amidst great feasting, till morning. People in the neighbourhood got up from their beds earlier than usual and went to Embuta's compound to watch the dancers.

Many spectators stood in front of the long, partitioned building owned by Embuta's wives. Some crowded the corridor of Achamba's house, and yet others stood a little distance away, near Embuta's hut. The onlookers thus almost encircled the dancers in the huge arena. The celebrants, young men and maidens, improvised songs upon songs for the occasion. One of them ran thus:

*Embuta has rubbed his bride.
He is now struggling for money.
If you are one with nothing
You disappear behind the bill.*

0-0-0-0-0-0

*Had I known I should
Have done otherwise.*

0-0-0-0-0

*Embuta has rubbed his wife.
He is now looking for food.
If you are one with nothing
You disappear behind the mountain.*

0-0-0-0-0

*Had I known I should
Have done otherwise.*

0-0-0-0-0.

Each time the bridal party stopped singing, some celebrants thought they heard a corresponding group, or so, singing, somewhere further south. Or was it simply the echoes of their own voices? They listened intently but soon reassured themselves. It was neither their own echoes, nor other human beings singing. It was rather the disembodied voice of Ngiekum, coming all the way from his sacred resting place. It was the drumming of Dudum Falls... *dim dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim - dim...*

The girls danced gaily, their chests and legs smeared with palm oil. But the boys did not rub themselves with any oil, and they tried, as they danced, to dodge being rubbed or stained by the playful girls or the bride. Echunjei was in their midst. The tall bride, light in complexion, had only a headscarf round her waist, her heavily oiled and glistening body made the cloth round her waist stick on to her skin. Her long dark hair was well-plaited, while her fully developed and exposed breasts stood pointedly, pushing forward her bust to the admiration of spectators. And as she responded to the tunes, most of which involved the stamping of the ground with the feet, her breasts heaved from time to time.

Achamba watched the *Ingua* from among the viewers in the veranda. His house, on the occasion, had been given a fresh coat of oil paint. As he was engrossed in the spectacle, Achamba overheard

a few admiring exclamations from some Akan women not far from where he was standing. 'What a wonderful place her new home is.' 'Look at the white man house. Where does one get money to build a house like this?'. 'It is true that her husband receives money in a hat...'

The fresh morning air, the early sunrise, the warm, invigorating sun rays and the food and raffia wine they had taken, all of these, made the encircled dancers sway about with renewed energy and excitement, literally exploding with youthful vigour. The young men, with admirable agility, shot, bounced, flew or spun across the arena 'to give *Ingua*' to their friends. The prancing maidens proudly displayed their pretty legs and heaving, bulbous breasts.

Amidst their improvised songs, and with synchronised precision, they clapped their hands, lowered and raised their bodies, kicked the floor once, and kicked it again, swayed this way and that way, and then straightened themselves for the normal dancing. The spectators enjoyed each of these moves and were thrilled.

Sitting on a wooden stool in front of his hut and also watching the dancing group was Achamba's father, Embuta. As he listened to the improvised songs, Embuta felt fine. His crutches by his side, he puffed away at his pipe with pleasure. If death were to come now he would calmly welcome it without regret. He was at total peace with himself. At least with his son now married, the foundation for an offspring, a grandchild, was already laid; the ancestral line was thus ensured. What more could a Dudum father wish for?

A week after the traditional celebration of their wedding, Achamba and Echunjei were now free to share the same room as husband and wife. The latter washed away from her body the oil with which she had been smeared, giving away to her family relations the oil-soaked dresses she had been wearing. She was then decked out in her finest and freshest dresses. And the force of her beauty and charms struck everyone who set eyes on her. She was, by common consent, acknowledged to be the paragon of beauty, the kind of village belle the likes of which none could recall in recent memory, and one not likely to be equalled in the near future.

Her beauty had few counterpointing blemishes. Gone were the lanky legs, lacking a little flesh around the knee or ankle, of the Form I girl of some years back. Gone equally were the skinny arms,

with slightly ungainly elbows, of the junior college girl Achamba first met. They were now replaced with full, shapely, long legs, and graceful arms, ending in toes and fingers with well - varnished nails.

Echunjei practised no bleaching that left those distasteful red and dark spots on the skin around the neck, ankles or feet. Nothing. Hers was the kind of complexion on which bleaching would be superfluous, and therefore unnecessary. What she needed, and did use, were but non-bleaching agents: soap, unguents and oils that gave her smooth skin, the additional smoothness and sheen that conferred to a woman already beautiful an ethereal touch.

She had a dimple on her chin, and a set of beautiful teeth with an enticing toothless gap in the centre of the upper row. At a certain angle her eyes gave her a sleepy look. She was soft - spoken, with a sweet musical voice, tinged with a faint, very faint, nasality. It was a joy to listen to her. She had a ready smile for all.

Echunjei had no need for artificial hair; she had natural hair in abundance. There was no hair dresser in the village, but she did not need any either. With her pins, rollers, hair oils, combs and a full-length mirror she worked on her own rich hair and gave herself a pretty perm.

Her pink dress, cut on an excellent bias, lay beautifully on her great callipygian behind. As she walked Echunjei was perfect co-ordination and gracefulness. Onlookers did not know which parts of her to admire the most: the lustily permed hair, or the dimpled face, the long legs, or the irresistible behind?

If Echunjei was physically beautiful, she was no less so morally. She had passed through college without any question raised about her moral conduct, and although many boys hovered around her during students' meetings, there were none who could boast of knowing her in the vulgar sense. Adventurous boys like only too well to make capital out of such conquests. But there were no such victories over Echunjei. She successfully resisted amorous advances from men and boys, and graduated from college without a scandal regarding her honour. Achamba, the groom, had no reason to doubt this integrity.

During the week when they were forbidden to share the same bed, Achamba had been working on a poem he would read to his bride when the time came for them to be together. But it had been

difficult for him to find an appropriate theme and the right words to convey his profound sentiments, to produce what he would have loved to call the final poem, the type of romantic lyric capable of knocking a woman off her feet. And after mentally groping here and there, he had to content himself with a rather common-place title 'You are the Best' which inspired the following poem:

YOU ARE THE BEST

*Much have I travelled
And much have I seen
In terms of female beauty and charms.
But never have I met
A girl with your charms.*

*There's a style in your walk,
And a charm in your smile;
There's magic in your look,
And grace in your manners,
All of them a magnate
That pulls me to bow down
Before you and worship at your feet
And pay tribute to your rare beauty.*

*What my eye admires
My heart desires.
Yes, my heart hungers after you!
What sensations
When you're in my arms!
Echu, you're the Best!*

Achamba handed Echunjei the poem after reading it aloud to her.

'Take, this is your wedding present,' he said.

'Thank you,' she replied, 'but I hope you mean what you say, and not just trying to sweet-talk me.'

'I'm not flattering you. It's nothing but the plain truth.'

'Well, let's see whether your honey tongue won't turn into bitter gall. I hope the nice things you're saying to me in this and your other poems won't become different things tomorrow now that we're married.'

‘Do you still have the other poems with you?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘Well, add this one to them and preserve them very well if you like. But mark this, the day I utter a harsh word to you, just bring out one of the poems and read it in my face to disprove me.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that I won’t annoy you ever.’

‘Are you sure? You really want me to believe all that?’

‘Of course, I am and I do. It’s true, what I’m saying.’

‘If truth could live forever in men’s tongues, I’d believe you. But you yourself know just too well that it isn’t possible.’

‘Yes, it is, you’re looking at one of the truest tongues that ever lived.’

‘Stop joking, Mr Truth. Time will tell just how far you can go. We’ll see.’

‘Yes, we’ll see,’ added Achamba, and with that he gathered his bride into his arms and kissed her very fervently as if to convince her of not only the truth of his statements but also of the sincerity of his feelings.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The meeting of the Dudum elite and elders scheduled for the month of August had been postponed to December. The dry season was certainly a more suitable period for people to travel than the rainy season. The motorable tract of road linking Dudum to Nkoman was more passable in the dry season. The postponement afforded Achamba enough time for publicity and persuasion. Consequently, he spent most of his long vacation going round, visiting groups of Dudum people all over the country.

Generally, he met with unexpected warm reception from some progressive men. He spoke to them on the need and necessity for the unity and development of their area, exhorting them to attend the Anjong meeting. Wherever he went, he left campaign agents behind to reinforce the education and information of the people. They were told to come along with enough money for their transportation, feeding and other practical needs that might arise at the meeting.

But the people at home, in their characteristic manner, took the publicity lightly. They dubbed it Achamba's meeting. It was only when Dudum people from outside the clan started arriving in Anjong that the sceptics at home saw the significance of the gathering. All sorts of people were around. Many sons who had virtually been forgotten by relatives at home came for the meeting, bringing numerous Christmas presents for their families. Elders, traditional rulers, politicians, and teachers at home all went to Anjong. The Akan people, despite their grievances against Achamba, attended the meeting. Something good might come from it after all. They did not want to earn a bad name for themselves at such a historic moment.

Three villages - Bonanyang, Angong, and Angai - were chosen to entertain the delegates of the meeting scheduled for the last three days of December, a village per day. Achamba and the major delegates with whom he had organised the meeting did not want the national security to misinterpret their intentions. So they solicited

the help of security agents and even journalists from Nkoman to give the occasion sufficient coverage and protection.

No school room could accommodate all the delegates; so the group moved into Anjong courthouse. For once Achamba was not in any of his well-tailored suits. On this occasion he was wearing an impressive, white *agbada*, with an attractive, grey felt-cap, resting firmly and comfortably on his rich hair. And when everyone was seated, he stood up, and in a brief welcome speech, expressed his gratitude to the delegates for responding positively to his call. He then presented the working paper for the three days, and proposed that before anything else they should elect officials to run the meeting. He sat down and the people began to propose candidates for the offices of the President, General Secretary, Treasurer and Financial Secretary. Three names soon came up: Ubeno, Abaago and Achamba, all candidates for the office of President. But before the members voted, a delegate from the South West asked for permission to say a word or two.

‘Dudum elders and sons and daughters gathered here today for this historic meeting, I have this to say before we proceed to elect officials for our meeting. I am forty-two years old, but to the best of my knowledge, I’ve never witnessed any meeting held in Dudum that has brought as many important Dudum people from all parts of the country like this one today. In fact, the presence of all traditional rulers and the great men Dudum can boast of should tell everyone here that this is not a meeting like any other; it is a unique assembly and calls for special handling by well-selected people. As you were told in the letters of invitation, the aim of the meeting was to find out in what ways we could develop our area, to bury all our differences once and for all, and to take an oath of total unity so as to approach development strategies from a position of unity of identity and purpose.

‘Consequently, I would like to suggest that we leave out our controversial politicians and look for neutral people to guide this assembly. Our politicians have done what they could, but events have beaten them. For years now the old politics in Dudum has brought nothing but distress to the people. In fact, all of you are witnesses to the fact that we have been ruined by silly politics. It is a sad story, a very sad story indeed. Many of us who have travelled outside this

clan have seen how other ethnic groups are struggling to develop their areas, some much smaller than Dudum. They have had to discard their disruptive dirty village politics in favour of progress. If they can do this why not us too? Let us turn over a new leaf.

'The idea for this meeting was the work of a single son, a son of the clan, in whom now lie the hopes of Dudum people. It was first conceived by Achamba who tirelessly and, single - handed, went round, spending his own money educating Dudum people and appealing to them to come home. This to me is quite an achievement because, like I said, nothing of the sort had occurred before.

'Since this child has shown proof of great initiative, why not give him the chance and see what else he can do for us still? He may be a mere child, but he has the head and the potential to do great things for Dudum. I've seen that he's prepared to sacrifice himself for us. Let us make Achamba not only President of this meeting but also President of the New Dudum Cultural and Development Association which hence-forth will embrace all of us here today, all Dudum people wherever they may be in Cameroon.' He sat down and was highly applauded.

But the elections did not get off the ground yet because delegate after delegate wanted to be heard before the elections. Each claimed to speak only for a minute or two but was carried far by rhetoric. They kept on harping on the same themes - the unity of all Dudum people, reconciliation of the rival villages, development strategies and so on. By the time the elections took place, Abaago and Ubeno, though only obliquely referred to, had been painted black. They were partly to blame for the disunity of the Dudum people; so when the assembly was finally asked to elect one of the three candidates as President, there was no one more qualified for the office than Achamba. The people chanted his name 'ACHAMBA, we want ACHAMBA to be our leader. ACHAMBA and no one else.' Thus Achamba, by popular acclamation, was elected the first General President of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association. It was a moving dramatic show of genuine support. The election of the other officials went on very successfully.

The executive, headed by Achamba, thanked the people for their support and took the running of the meeting into their hands. The people broke up into working committees, each containing a

balanced number of representatives from all parts of Dudum. Among the main committees were Finance, Project, Cultural, Education, Reconciliation and Resolution committees, each having a President and a Secretary. A classroom was assigned to each committee, and for three days the delegates tried to shape their future in spirited discussions. The executive, the monitoring group, went from committee to committee to witness these discussions.

The Anjong School compound was full of dance groups and curious observers, some of whom peeped through the windows to see what was happening in each classroom. And they were moved by what they saw. It was the height of unprecedented seriousness. At the end of each session, the participants were entertained with food, drinks and dances. They worked well into the evening. Most people did not return home at the end of each day. They spent the night in Anjong. The atmosphere around Anjong was festive. Back-to-Land was very full and delegates spent lavishly on beer. Friends and relatives entertained one another.

The third and the last day was the most important; it was the day for hearing the committee reports which were read and adopted. The Project Committee made recommendations for the construction of inter-village roads and a community hall, and also for the building of a giant-water scheme. It also proposed that government should provide the Dudum people with a Post Office and a hospital. The Cultural Committee called for a judicious revival of the culture of the Dudum people, discarding all that was primitive and barbarous but retaining and encouraging its positive aspects. For its own part, the Education committee made recommendations for a private secondary school in the area, and stressed that parents should desist from giving their daughters into early marriages. Instead, it went on, girls should be sent to school and colleges like the boys. And that, instead of spending money marrying many wives, Dudum people, especially the young ones, should invest in education because it was only education that would bring light to them.

The Reconciliation Committee that had been contacting and persuading the controversial figures behind the scene came out with its report. Theirs was the most difficult of tasks, it said, since they were dealing with the very essence of the problems plaguing the Dudum people. It would be unconvincing if they claimed to find a

quick solution to those problems. The latter did not lend themselves to a few days' solution. Therefore they had none for the Dudum people.

What they did have, however, was the assurance on the part of the elders from the opposing parts of Dudum to tone down their ill feelings towards each other in the interest of peace and progress. Noting that a tense atmosphere would not benefit Dudum, the committee said the protagonists in the Dudum-village politics had agreed to explore ways to continue talking to, instead of talking at, one another.

In this connection, the committee announced that its members had agreed to meet again in the future to work out a peace formula acceptable to both Chiefs Akaya and Umeitoh. Central on the agenda of such a meeting would be the reconciliation of the protagonists. Concluding, the committee expressed the wish that the coming of a new divisional officer for Mbambe might strengthen the improved relationship between Upper and Lower Dudum given birth to at the Anjong Conference.

The Finance Committee made a proposal on how to finance the various projects adopted. It categorized all Dudum elite. Each was to pay a certain sum proportionate to his or her annual income. It also recommended that delegates should make financial pledges independent of their levies. There was an enthusiastic response. People gave money on the spot for the development projects in the area. A substantial amount of money was collected and much more was promised, redeemable within the first six months after the meeting.

But the meeting nearly ended on a sad note, an anticlimax; the false note was a controversial question raised by a primary school teacher from Upper Dudum. It was the question of where the capital of Dudum would be.

'I believe that after ironing out some of our differences, we should not leave this question of headquarters unresolved. It is also one of the root causes of the trouble in Dudum. We should settle it now.' Some people applauded him, but most did not.

It would not be true to say that the prime movers of the Anjong meeting had not thought of this question. In fact, it was at the back of their minds all the time. They had carefully avoided it because

of its explosive potential. Achamba and the other officials had wanted to unite the people completely and defer resolving the question of the headquarters. It needed tact and skill, but unfortunately, as it now came up, they had to find a suitable solution to it, or the young association would hardly get off the ground.

Predictably, most people proposed Anjong while others, mostly from Akan, proposed Akan. There followed a heated argument, and Achamba was embarrassed. At a time when the national party preached democracy, it was hard not to respect the opinion of the majority of the people who stood for Anjong. But if that happened Akan might rebel, and the association would be killed. There was a dilemma.

Achamba quickly thought of a compromise, modifying the question. He said they should forget the question of the capital for the moment but that Anjong could be their rallying point as it had been in the past. It should be the headquarters of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association and not the political capital of Dudum; that status would be determined in the future. The compromise was accepted by many, but not without a little reluctance from some Akan supporters.

The last committee whose report was read amidst the clapping of hands was the Resolutions Committee. It recapitulated some of the recommendations of the other committees, and went ahead to make more far reaching ones, one of them investing Achamba with more power to shoulder the responsibility of steering the Dudum people towards greater achievement. Part of it ran thus:

‘Considering that we have been lagging behind other ethnic groups in matters of development, considering that Dudum for a long time has been suffering from the inability to agree on a common development strategy, considering that this difficulty has been brought about by the lack of a selfless and unanimously chosen capable leader whom the people can trust, considering the clarion call from the head of state for every group of people to demonstrate their dynamism and seriousness in the task of nation-building, considering that we have lost the sub-section elections several times because of our divisive tendencies, we have decided: Dudum people have solemnly decided today to designate Achamba our only candidate for the forthcoming sub-section elections of the CNO

Party. We give Achamba our unflinching support and loyalty to act in the name of this infant association to appeal for aid, any aid, from the authorities concerned for the development of our dear homeland. We, Dudum people, are leaving from here a united and reconciled people. Whoever attempts to revive the buried and forgotten issues and grievances of the past does so at the risk of incurring the curse of the entire clan, the curse of Ngiekum himself. Long Live Dudum Cultural and Development Association; Long Live Cameroon.'

There followed a standing ovation which lasted about three minutes. When the commotion died down, it was but normal for Achamba to address the gathering.

'Elders and rulers of Dudum, sons and daughters of Dudum, we have come to the end of three days of important and far-reaching discussions. I am grateful for the confidence you have in me. I find myself in many ways unqualified for the great responsibilities placed on my shoulders. But since, as we say, the voice of the people is the voice of God, I believe that God will give me the power. Dudum people will not cease to give me the necessary support and encouragement to get this land out of the obscurity and ignorance which have helped to keep it down for a long time.

'There's just a simple question I'd like to ask you. What is it that, on a quiet night one is likely to hear, no matter where one is situated in Dudum?... Yes, what is it?... Of course, the Dudum Falls. We hear the Dudum Falls in the day, but we hear them particularly in the night. From childhood we are told that it is not just a simple waterfall. Every Dudum child knows that the roaring of Dudum Falls is the abiding voice of our founding father, Ngiekum. So, what does it mean when we hear Ngiekum's voice day in, day out?

'It is the voice of morality, calling us to order, calling on us to shun evil ways and promote worthwhile pursuits. It is the conscience of the thief at night, asking him some disturbing questions; it is the companion of the lonely traveller; it is the participant in the dancing arena; it is the ever-present participant echoing the communal market voice; yes, it is the subdued, distant but constant contributor to the discussion we have carried out here. In short, whether in the day or in the night, Ngiekum is incessantly reminding us that we are one and ought to remain so, that our strength lies in our unity.

‘Indeed such a united effort from the Dudum people has been long overdue. We have paid dearly for our squabbles. We have been exploited by people who have posed as our friends. The consolation now is that conditions for any such exploitation have been eliminated by this historic meeting.

‘We are now condemned to make or to mar. The destiny of Dudum is in our hands. *Amumba! Amumba!* Yes it’s only us. If not us, who? If not now, when? If not here, where? Thank you very much and may Ngiekum bless you.’ The delegates applauded and roared with joy. Some chanted: ACHA-MBA ACHA-MBA several times.

That marked the end of formal discussions and speech-making. The people danced, ate and drank throughout the night of the last day of the year. The following day the delegates dispersed to their various destinations, while Achamba and his wife went to Mbambe where a teaching appointment in the primary school had been offered her. She was proud of her husband. The couple, it was said, had, even in their marriage, emblemized the unity of Dudum.

Two weeks later Achamba was on a casual visit to Nkoman Town, and his attention was attracted by a bold caption in a local tabloid. It ran, ‘BIRTH OF A NEW DUDUM’, and below it appeared the following article which he read with great interest:

Non-Dudum citizens have over the years built, rather gratuitously, many pejorative associations around the word ‘Dudum’ that it is hard for any but the natives to view the area in a positive light. A mere fifty kilometres from Nkoman Town, Dudum is a local community like any other in the republic, with its own proud sons and daughters in all walks of life.

It was partly out of the desire to rectify the myopic and distorted outside vision of themselves that the Dudum intelligentsia, led by Mr. Achamba, took the courageous and commendable decision to rally all their enlightened sons and daughters together with traditional rulers and politicians to a mammoth meeting to talk development and unity, and to bury, once and for all, their internal differences, petty jealousies, pointless political squabbles and sub-group loyalties.

The meeting lasted for three exhausting but rewarding days during which the people worked in committees. In the hot and stifling school rooms at Anjong, the delegates debated, animatedly and at great length, many issues that had been plaguing them for long. And when they finally drew up some resolutions

on the third day, it was with self-congratulatory greetings that man shook hands with man, bottle clinked against bottle, glass against glass: the people had arrived at momentous decisions.

It is difficult for this reporter to describe the euphoria that gripped Anjong in particular, and Dudum in general, for those three festive days that incidentally still carried with them joyful echoes of Christmas. The people joyfully danced and feasted throughout the night of the last day of December, a fitting and symbolic conclusion, indeed, of the old year, and a wonderful New Year present to every son and daughter of Dudum: the birth of a new Dudum.

Achamba folded the paper and gazed into impersonal space with a feeling of contentment.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Five months after the great meeting of the elite and elders that made him the President of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association, DCDA, Achamba was still basking in the sunshine of his new socio-cultural status. There was none to rival him in Dudum, for he had scored a series of firsts: He was the first President of the DCDA, first potential sub-section elections candidate from the new Dudum constituency, first university graduate from Dudum, and the lucky husband of the first Dudum girl to have graduated from college. Achamba's fame thus soared.

In a different community these solid personal achievements might have been the pride of the beneficiary's village of origin. But as a Dudum adage goes, locusts often come down in the village of those with no bags. In Dudum Achamba's exploits were viewed with mixed feelings. There were many people of goodwill, from both Lower and Upper Dudum, who took genuine pride in his successes, especially the younger generation for whom he was a role model, an inspirer. But there were others who did not look kindly on his rising fortunes, among them his traditional enemies from his own village, Akan, top on the list being Abaago.

It meant nothing to those die-hards that the young man rapidly 'rising into a superstar in Dudum was from Akan; that the young cock animating the entire neighbourhood belonged to their household; nor that the leadership vacuum in Dudum was about to be filled by their own son. On the contrary Abaago and his group felt that Achamba's rising star would only eclipse that of their village. At the great meeting Achamba had come up with the idea that Anjong should be the headquarters of the newly formed Dudum Cultural and Development Association. There, he had been designated as the future candidate for the sub-section elections.

When that took place, he would have more political power and a greater voice in any future talk regarding the political capital of Dudum. It did not take a genius to figure out what Achamba's choice

would be, given his past track record. That would be the end of the effort by him, (Abaago) and the others, to have the capital in Akan, in accordance with the historical seniority of their village over Anjong.

If in the past Abaago had the feeling that Achamba was a threat rather than an asset to Akan, that feeling was even more intense now; if there was a time when Abaago had the fear that Achamba might wield influence over the younger generation, that fear was even greater now. For there were many young people who looked up to him as a prototype.

Therefore, to stem the tide of Achamba's popularity, Abaago summoned a meeting of the Akan youth in Chief Umeitoh's palace. His main aim was to caution them against being brainwashed by Achamba. But the meeting only ended up with the young people split into two camps, with the minority adhering to Abaago's philosophy, and the majority espousing Achamba's ideas.

Abaago became more frustrated, for his fears had been confirmed; Achamba now had palpable influence on some young people. At the meeting he screamed at them:

'What is this I see and hear? Is this what you as the young torchbearers would be to Akan? Then why are we proud that you are the young suckers to replace us tomorrow? Are you going to sell your birthright to Anjong as your traitorous brother Achamba has done? Akan, the original village of Ngiekum, would indeed be ashamed of any sons and daughters who would go the way of Achamba. We the adults would spit on them; for they would not be better than *ibet*,' with that Abaago spat in great contempt as if his eyes had fallen on *ibet*, shit, for that was what the word meant. Some young people felt insulted and clearly manifested their dissatisfaction by grumbling. From that moment it became quite clear to many that Abaago bore great contempt for Achamba; his strong dislike for the young man was approaching the level of active ill will, and about to take on the ominous dimension of malice.

During the Easter holidays Achamba told Echunjei, now six months pregnant, he wanted to pay a brief visit home to gauge, so to speak, the temperature of the people, months after the great

meeting. Given the bumpy nature of the road and her present condition, it was out of the question that Echunjei should accompany him. It was too remote a possibility.

But she felt uneasy that her husband should be going home. Without knowing why she had the strange feeling, that the trip home might not augur well for her husband. She sought for reasons to restrain him from going.

‘Darling,’ she addressed him, ‘I’m not feeling fine.’

‘What’s wrong, Dear?’

‘I don’t know, but I feel that you should not go home.’

‘Why do you feel so?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’ll be lonely, I know, but I won’t be long, D. Besides, the houseboy, the housemaid and your younger sister will keep you company. My colleagues and our neighbours are around. Nothing will happen to you. There’s enough money in the house.’

‘It’s not money or me I’m concerned about. It’s you I’m worried about.’

‘Sweetheart, I’ll be O.K It must be the uneasy feeling engendered by your pregnancy. They say that with some women it lingers on much longer than in others. I think it is still with you, that feeling. But I assure you, I’ll be O.K. I’m big enough to take care of myself. I’ll be all right. Take this, D,’ and with that Achamba warmly and tenderly kissed away his wife’s uneasiness.

He was to spend only four days at home. His scanty luggage consisted of a suitcase and a carton. The suitcase contained his spare fresh clothes and a set of wax wrappers for his mother-in-law; and the carton carried assorted presents from Echunjei to her parents and parents-in-law. For his father-in-law, Achamba bought a bottle of whisky.

He had planned his journey home to coincide with Anjong market day so that he could easily find a vehicle. When the day arrived he, his wife, and their houseboy stood on the main road to Dudum and waited for the Land rover to take him home. The Land rover arrived, packed full of passengers. It was wise he had booked for a front seat; he would have been squeezed among the passengers, or he would have inconvenienced somebody else to yield his front seat to him.

Achamba got onto the reserved front seat, exchanged greetings with his wife, and then the vehicle took off. Echunjei and the houseboy stood watching it until it disappeared around a bend. As they returned to the house, Echunjei sighed. Tried as she could, she could not quite get over the malaise that had come over her ever since her husband made known his intention of going home.

Meanwhile, after less than two hours, the Land rover arrived at Tinako'o and then drove down to Etwii before hurtling its way over the stony hill side down to Anjong Valley. It then drove straight to the frontage of Back-To-Land where a few passengers alighted. Long lines of market women and other traders were still moving in from the four corners of Dudum.

Achamba paid a brief visit to his in-laws and presented them the gifts he had brought. They were happy for their presents. The chief sent for a calabash of raffia wine which he shared with his son-in-law. As they drank, he asked Achamba,

'How is your wife?'

'She's quite well, *Mbe*.'

'Then why haven't you come together?'

'Well, she's not quite sound.'

'You just said she's quite well, and now you say she's not quite sound. So what do you mean? Is there anything wrong with her?'

'Nothing negative, *Mbe*. Only that she's... Well, she's heavy.'

'God is supreme,' said Chief Akaya joyfully. Then he tipped some wine into the ancestral hole on the floor. 'So how long has she been heavy?'

'She's in her sixth month. You can then see why she's not with me, given the bad nature of the roads.'

'You're right. It is a good enough reason for not taking the risk. How long are you going to be at home?'

'Four days, *Mbe*. I'll be returning on Akan market day, when I can possibly catch a vehicle.'

'Make sure you call on us on your way back. There's a little bush fowl here for your wife to prepare your soup with.'

'Thank you very much, *Mbe*.' With that Achamba took leave of his in-laws and proceeded to the market, followed by one of the Chief's sons carrying his suitcase and carton. They went straight to Martha's Mbu House, famous for decent raffia wine.

The bar was full of happy old friends and acquaintances, most of them primary school teachers. Achamba was given a special seat, and when he sat down, he cupped his hands and greeted other customers.

They chorused in, vying with one another to greet him, calling him by his new cultural title, Mr. President.

'Taste Mr. President *mimbo*,' a customer commanded the barmaid. There were five jugs of raffia wine on the floor, and the girl tipped a bit of wine from each into a glass and passed it onto Achamba. He did not pass it straight onto his lips but held the glass briefly under his nostrils. A customer who had been attracted by Achamba's unusual habit of smelling rather than tasting the wine said, 'Mr. President, we taste wine, we don't smell it'.

'Yes, I smell it before tasting,' replied Achamba. 'I know good wine when I smell it; I taste it to prove the smell; then I drink it for confirmation.'

'Isn't it funny, smelling wine before tasting?' asked the curious customer.

'Not at all,' replied Achamba. 'There is nothing absolutely strange about it as far as I am concerned. According to me smelling is believing; tasting is proof; and drinking is confirmation.'

'That's a good one,' said a different teacher. 'I'll see which of the five jugs you'll pick out as the one containing the best wine. We've already established that.'

'Sure, I'll tell you the one,' added Achamba with confidence. After passing the rest of the wine from the other jugs below his nostrils, he confidently pointed to the third jug on the line.

'That jug contains the best wine. It is from a raffia that was ripe before it was cut, a four-frond raffia. I drink no wine before its time. I drink only ripe wine. Yes, the third jug contains the best wine.' Achamba was heavily applauded, for, indeed, the particular jug contained wine earlier rated by the convivial company as excellent. Only then did he taste the wine, for proof, as he said. Then he ordered a round of drinks from the jug to be given to everyone in the bar. There was greater applause greeting this generous offer.

'Thank you, Mr. President!; Long live Mr. President!; President for life!...', came jubilant voices.

Someone fished out a kola-nut from the pocket of his jumper and said, 'He brings life who brings kola.' He broke it and then threw the five lobes on the floor: three faced down and two up. Other customers were watching the lobes. He picked them up again, and after shaking them in his closed fist, cast them on the floor once more. This time two faced down and three up. Another teacher then said, 'The kola-nut has twice rejected your idea, whatever you have in your mind. What are you asking the kola-nut, anyway?

'Well, I'm saying,' answered the one who had broken the kola-nut, 'if we're drinking here with one mind; or if everyone here has a clean mind; or if we're drinking and chatting in good faith, let the kola-nut give us one mouth.'

'But it hasn't,' butted in another. 'So there must be someone here with an evil intention. There is someone here with two hearts.'

'Let's give the kola-nut a third try,' added the owner of the kola-nut. So he picked up the lobes and cast them on the floor for the last time, and again three faced down and two up.

Don't torture the kola-nut,' came in another customer. 'Its message is clear. There's a bad man among us. But whoever he is, let Ngiekum take care of him,' and as he said so, he passed the glass of wine he held onto his left hand and threw the wine on the floor as a vehement sign of curse to the ill-intentioned person.

The five lobes of kola-nut were shared among customers clamouring to eat them. When the first round of drinks was consumed, Achamba ordered a second for all the customers before leaving them. They wished him a safe journey home and many more years at the helm of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association.

'That's what I call a man of the people,' said one teacher. 'A free-handed person, a potential politician and not those tight-fisted people who go around claiming to be politicians but cannot offer you a glass of common raffia wine.'

'Yes, Mr. Achamba has a great future in Dudum. That man will go places,' concluded another teacher.

On his way out of the market, Achamba passed near a line of girls selling groundnuts. They held a few grains to him, each imploring him to buy from her. They were girls big enough to be in Forms IV or V, but they were still in the primary school. He collected the

groundnuts for tasting and stood in front of them, not knowing which to buy from without hurting the others. Someone had to be disappointed; he could not buy from all the sellers. Then as he stood wondering what to do, an idea came to him.

'Five plus seven?' he asked abruptly. The girls looked at him amused and embarrassed at the same time.

'I say five plus seven?' he repeated. Then the boldest among the girls ventured an answer. 'Twelve!' she replied just as abruptly.

'There she is; you've got the answer,' said Achamba. 'I'll buy from you. I asked you girls a mental sum and only one person found the answer. So I'll buy only from her.' The girls burst into a giggle, and one said, 'Please Sir, ask another question. Buy from us too.'

'All right, everybody will be happy,' Achamba consoled her. From the girl who had provided the answer, he bought two cups of groundnuts, from the rest, a cup each. He paid them and left. But he had not gone far when one of the girls shouted 'Five plus seven!' Achamba turned and looked at them, and they were all laughing. He beamed at them.

The chief's son was still carrying his luggage. The next spot they stopped at was Back-To-Land. The bar was as lively as ever. There was music, dancing and beer drinking. Those revellers near whom he sat were happy to see him. An acquaintance yelled at the bar attendant to bring a beer to the President of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association. A '33' Export was offered him.

After drinking a glass of beer, Achamba sat more relaxed as he watched the dancers on the floor. Just then he spotted, at the far end of the bar, Emburacho already tipsy. He too had recognized Achamba towards whom he lurched. Achamba sat unperturbed.

When Emburacho got near him, Achamba created sitting space for him. The fellow's clothes had a stale sweat-smell, but Achamba was not bothered. Without caring to greet Achamba first, Emburacho started by demanding a beer from him. Achamba then called on the bar attendant to supply a beer each to the friends he was conversing with, including Emburacho.

Emburacho gulped down almost half the beer before standing the bottle on the floor.

'Look at me, Achamba,' he appealed to the high school teacher. 'Look at what I'm wearing. Do you call what I have on my feet

shoes? Look at my clothes. We were mates in the primary school, but you have gone far. Everywhere one hears only of Achamba, Achamba. You're a big man now. But you've forgotten of your old school mates. You cannot buy a singlet for me or even slippers,' he ended his speech.

'I haven't forgotten you, Emburacho. How can I?'

'Then do something to show me that you still think of me. Put shoes on my feet, Achamba!'

'I'll do so next time. When next I'm coming home, I'll buy you a pair of shoes, Emburacho.'

'No, buy them now! Let me have my own now.'

'But we're in a bar. There are no shoes here in the bar.'

'Then give me the money to buy them myself. I'll run to the market to buy them now.'

To cut short the unnecessary argument Achamba put his hand in the back pocket of his trousers and pulled out a little wad of notes. He took out a five thousand-franc note and handed it to Emburacho for the shoes.

'Next week I want to see the new shoes you have bought with this money. Do you hear, Emburacho? Don't spend the money on something else. I want to see the shoes next week.'

'Thank you, Mr. President,' Emburacho beamed at Achamba.

Then Achamba went out to urinate behind the bar. But the make-shift urinal there was a mess; it contained little mounds of human excrement dotted here and there. He then moved towards a nearby bush, but his movement was checked by a steamy chunk of human dung freshly dropped by its impatient owner. Achamba instinctively recoiled from it, managed to keep himself out of view, and made water.

On his way back to the bar he bumped into a woman who had hardly turned behind the drinking spot when she began releasing her urine noisily while standing, with lines of urine running down her thighs. Not far from the woman a mangy dog was in throes. It had probably swallowed a bone or something but was struggling unsuccessfully to vomit it out. It retched and retched, but its agony was far from over. Achamba withdrew his eyes from the sickly-looking creature. Poor thing, he thought.

When he got back into the bar, Achamba noticed that Emburacho the lunatic was gone.

'I think he's gone to the market to buy his shoes,' Achamba said to his nearest neighbour.

'So you believed what Emburacho was telling you about shoes?' asked the other.

'Do you mean he was telling me a lie that he needed shoes?'

'Of course, he needs shoes,' replied the neighbour, 'but I think he needs his beer even more. Emburacho won't return to his house until he has drunk all the money you gave him.'

'Well, that's his problem, whatever he does with the money. Next time I'll know better. The first fool is not a fool.'

After giving some money to the chief's son, Achamba dismissed him and then left for home. He walked the short distance between Akan and Anjong, sharing company with Akan market goers also going back home. Two women helped carry his suitcase and the carton. They saw him off right at his compound. He gave them some change he had in his pocket, and they were very happy.

Achamba was warmly received by his brothers, half brothers and sisters. While his mother was glad to see her son, Embuta was a bit worried.

'Where is my wife? Where is Echunjei?' he asked anxiously.

'She's back in Mbambe, pa. She's not feeling fine.'

'Aha I thought so,' said Embuta worriedly. 'What's wrong with her? Is she ill?'

'Not really, except the woman illness. She's heavy.'

'Fine... Since when?'

'She's six months. But you look worried, pa. What's the matter?'

'Well, first rest, son; we'll talk later. Really nothing much.'

Achamba went to his house and after taking a bath, he changed his clothes. He was then served with a hot dish of churned cocoyams, well-prepared and spiced. He carried the food to his father's hut where he sat opposite Embuta before eating.

Embuta asked him to bring down a calabash of raffia wine hanging from a rope just above the log-fire. Achamba did so, served his father first before serving himself also, drinking from his father's horn. He then asked his father what it was that bothered him.

'It's your journey home, son,' he replied. 'Remember sometime ago, in answer to my concern about you and your wife settling down here, you told me you would be working outside the clan, only

occasionally paying a visit home. Well, I'm still as worried as ever concerning your presence around. How long do you intend to be at home?'

'Four days, dad. I'll be going back on *Njed*, so that I can catch a Land rover at the market. Was that all you were worried about, dad?'

'Well, yes. I live at home with these people, son. I know their minds. I know how some feel towards my family. Beware of Abaago in particular. If you go out, mind the way you drink when you're in their midst. Be careful with your cup. If you must drink in someone's house, make sure you chew a leaf from the herb I showed you. The world is bad and dangerous now. Don't be careless with yourself.

'If someone fails to get to me, he may well find it easier to get to you. Indeed, you may even be a better target; for what am I that I can be a threat to anybody? Of what use is an old one-legged man? I think my days are numbered in this world. But you are different. I hear your name is ringing all over Dudum. When I do so and I know how some Akan people feel towards us, I fear for my family.'

'Where is this serious talk leading to, dad? And what has given rise to it?' Achamba asked his father.

'Good question, son. I now come to the point. Two days ago I had a very disturbing dream, a dream in which I wept; I wept for the death of my father. That dream is portentous. I told you once, if you can still remember, that my father was killed on a battle field at Edom, long ago, before you were born. As a young man I and others of my age group fought alongside the adults. My father was killed by a bullet from a Tiba man's gun.

'Two nights ago the whole war scenario vividly came back to me in a dream. Every detail appeared to me again as if it was the historical reality that it was. The only difference was that, unlike in the actual war when my father was almost killed instantly by the bullet that had lodged under his left breast, the death in the dream was prolonged and more painful. My father screamed for help. But it was impossible for us to get to him to rescue him; the enemies outnumbered us and had actually encircled him. We scattered in various directions in the bush, and none of us dared to raise his head because enemy guns were pointing in all directions.

'I screamed. I tried in vain to break loose from the briars and twines that held me down in the thicket in order to get to my father. My struggles and screams woke your mother who shook me. And when I woke up from the nightmare I was panting heavily, covered with sweat. I was a bit relieved that it was only a dream but I had been terribly shakened.

'I asked your mother to light the kerosene lamp immediately. And she did. I peered around the compound but places were quiet. I think it was around the second cock crow when I woke up from sleep. But I could not sleep again. The thought of the agony of my father whom I had not dreamed about ever since he died, scared sleep off my eyes. I spent the rest of the night staring at the bamboo-ceiling, now lighted by the yellow glow from the lamp, until dawn.

'I have been most uneasy since I had that dream. It is ominous. That was why I was worried when I saw you. I don't know what it can possibly mean. Many years after his death my father comes back to me and in such tragic circumstances. I don't know what that dream portends. I think you're tired. You should go to bed. Good night.'

'Good night, dad.'

With that father and son separated and went to sleep.

The next day Achamba bought a calabash of raffia wine and went to pay a courtesy visit to Chief Umeitoh. And when he got to the palace, he found Abaago there, chatting with the chief. Achamba performed the usual traditional salutation after which Chief Umeitoh addressed him.

'Achamba, welcome.'

'Thank you, *Mbe*'

'When did you come?'

'Last night, *Mbe*.'

'How are your people at Mbambe?'

'They're well, *Mbe*.'

'What has brought you home?'

'Nothing particular, *Mbe*. We're on holiday, so I thought I could pay a brief visit home.'

'I know what has brought this man home, *Mbe*,' Abaago butted in. 'He has surely come to confuse our young people. He has come to mislead the Akan youth. This much is clear from the recent

meeting I held here with the young men of Akan. Achamba has sown seeds of dissension among them. Many are ready to go his wayward way. This much I know.'

'*Mbe*, this is rather strange,' complained Achamba. 'I come to pay a courtesy call on his Royal Highness and Abaago takes me to task. I'm not in a mood for confrontation. I don't think it has been, nor will it ever be, my intention to mislead our young people. Whatever influence I have had or I intend to have on them should be positive.'

'This is in line with the spirit of the great meeting Dudum people held in Anjong school. If one were to go by the declarations of that meeting, talk like the type Abaago is uttering is uncalled for. We ought to forge ahead, cultivating the spirit of reconciliation rather than nurturing confrontation.'

'What do you call positive influence?' Abaago retorted. 'Is it positive influence to indoctrinate young people against the wishes of their elders? You are the one cultivating confrontation. You have manipulated the youth to subvert the will of the elders.'

'I've manipulated no one, Mr. Abaago. The young people you are talking of have minds of their own. They are intelligent and can reason for themselves. It would be an insult to their intelligence to suggest that they are subjected to remote control. They can make out the difference between truth and falsehood; they can see through you.'

'What do you mean by that Achamba? I say what do you mean by what you've just ...?'

'Enough for now, Abaago,' Chief Umeitoh interposed. 'Let's be charitable to our visitor and savour what he's brought to us as wine.'

Then the chief asked his *chinda* to serve them the wine. And as they drank, they chatted on less controversial topics. Although in his heart Abaago still harboured bitterness against Achamba, on the whole, however, the three men ended their discussion on a tranquil note. It was thus in a serene mood that Achamba returned to his father's compound.

As he made for their homestead, Achamba heard the happy laughter of Umeitoh's children at play somewhere in the palace. That joyous note touched a sensitive chord in his soul, triggering off a sentimental journey down memory lane. He recalled, and then

hummed in his mind, those nostalgic tunes that marked his childhood experiences, particularly in the company of his beloved elder sister. In those days they would accompany their mother to their farm, their job being to scare off, through singing, rampaging monkeys, gorillas, or chimpanzees from their cornfield in the glade of the tropical forest.

Only a toddler then, he was often strapped to the back of his sister. In a sustained, complicated tune, her voice resonated powerfully throughout the forest, reminding the foraging animals of the prohibitive presence of humans, their mortal foes. As he reproduced in his mind one unforgettable tune, Achamba could still see through his mind's eye, and despite the distance of years, the picture of the little black girl of ten or thereabouts, proudly standing in the clearing of the jungle, her kid brother on her back and the elderly women working nearby, pouring out her soul. Those were heavenly years, he thought wistfully, years when nature still wore a magical dress. Those were the golden years of his youth. Several other tunes rushed into his mind, most of them related to boys and girls dancing or playing in the village square in the moonlight.

But one haunting melody kept creeping up in his mind, and no matter what he did, Achamba could not keep it at bay for long. It came readily and repeatedly to mind each time he wanted to hum a different song. It was an elegiac tune, only heard and enjoyed when someone had died, not a good sign, then, to hum it outside the context of death.

Chapter Twenty-Five

On the night of Achamba's second day at home Dudum had a stormy rainfall greater than any it had witnessed before. True, it was early rainy season, but nothing during the day had prepared the people for such an inclement night condition. It seemed an ordinary day as usual. The people had come back from their farms and raffia groves, prepared and eaten their evening meal before retiring to bed.

In Embuta's homestead Embuta's wives and children had withdrawn to their rooms, Achamba to his, and Embuta to his hut. It all started with a distant rumbling of thunder coming from Dudum Falls in the south, a gentle rustling breeze that developed into a wind, intermittent flashes of lightning, and then sporadic drops of rain that came down like hailstones. But all these were a mere prelude to the violent storm and the heavy downpour that were still to come.

Then the wind developed into a storm that was blowing with ferocious intensity. Achamba could hear the corrugated iron sheets on his house creaking and flapping in the storm, and branches of trees giving way under the immense pressure of the tempest. The rumbling thunder was no longer a distant sound; it was near and here. There were violent and angry thunderclaps conjugated with terrifying flashes of lightning. The heavy, sporadic drops of rain then became a steady, heavy downpour that pounded roofs and the window panes.

It was as if the den of the wild and undomesticated elements had been thrown open and the chained forces let loose. The furious rain, the violent storm, the angry thunder, and the intermittent lightning—all of these—joined in their elemental rage to make of that night one of the most terrifying in the history of the clan. People huddled up shivering from sheer fright, in their various houses. The fury outside was terrible. The roaring of Dudum Falls seemed to have increased a hundredfold, commingling with the natural forces.

Achamba stealthily pulled back the bolt of his window and gently pushed the window shutters and peeped outside. It was pitch dark. He had just time enough to peep outside when the storm slammed the window shut, and he winced and jerked backwards. It was as though someone from outside had forcefully closed the shutters. Achamba quickly bolted them and went back under his blanket wrapping himself up in a bundle.

When he had opened his window shutters to peep outside, it was to verify if there were people in the vast courtyard. He had thought he heard voices of people crying, but the storm had rudely closed the shutters and Achamba did not have the courage to open them again.

But as he lay shivering under the blanket, he was convinced he heard, in the midst of the savage sounds outside, people crying or dancing; he thought he heard people screaming for help; he thought he heard women and children wailing; he thought he heard the notes of the *ndek* beating a mournful funeral message; he thought he heard Echunjei, heavy with pregnancy and drenched to the bones, beating frantically at his door for him to open and let her in ...This was unbearable.

Achamba sneaked out of bed once more and tiptoed to the inner door with his torch. He opened it and proceeded to the parlour door. He placed his ear at the keyhole and listened intently. What he actually heard was not Echunjei wailing but the roar of the warring elements. Then he mustered courage and opened the door, and a blast of wind mixed with slanting rain greeted him. Achamba quickly sent a powerful beam of light from his torch outside, swinging it this way and that way, covering most of the courtyard. But he saw not a single human being but slanting lines of rain and a mighty pool of rushing water.

Achamba rapidly slammed the door and bolted it from within. He went back into his blanket and lay awake listening to the raging sounds from without. And then moments later, the various voices came back and filled his mind again. He made a conscious effort to push out of his mind these figments of his own imagination. But they did not quite go away.

How could one relate, Achamba asked himself, a picture of a night like this to someone who did not experience it himself? How could he even come close to conveying a tenth of its impact to

Echunjei? It would be impossible. This was one of those experiences impossible to capture through description. One needed to live it live.

Though no description could do it justice, Achamba planned to capture the stormy night through verse. He would try and put it in a poem for Echunjei. With that decision he spent some time listening to the raging rain outside, partly working out, in his mind, poetic lines around such nouns as wind, storm, rain, lightning, tempest, and Dudum Falls.

He tried, as far as it was mentally possible, to conjure words of power, nouns and verbs of action, together with appropriate adjectives to weave around the various elements of nature unleashed outside. At around two a.m. the rage subsided, with the heavy downpour reduced to a drizzle. What now dominated the night was the loud drumming of Dudum Falls, their volume having been increased by the rushing rain water from the mountain rivulets, and the obviously swollen River Feg.

Achamba continued to reflect upon his poem, and after some time he was quite sure he would write a poem about the frightful experience. Some of the lines, images and motifs stood out clearly in his mind. If he waited until morning before committing them to paper, he might not remember them again. So he got out of bed, lighted his kerosene lamp, got a sheet of paper and a pen, and sat at his table just to jot down the lines in any order without any attempt to write them out neatly.

Thus he poured out what he had in his mind, filling two sheets of paper in the process, to polish them in the morning. He went back to bed, but sleep could not come. He found himself still thinking about the poem. And he was soon up once more, to commit to paper fresh images and lines he had come up with. By the time he finally returned to bed, he had filled another sheet of paper with poetic lines.

Then he fell asleep. In his semi-unconscious state his unwritten poem did not leave him. On the contrary it appeared well-written out in his dream. Those elusive images and lines he had tried to grasp now appeared well-ordered and arranged and structured out in a coherent poem in five stanzas. He could read it clearly, and was very pleased with his effort.

Then Achamba was rudely awakened from sleep by a rapping, nervous knock at his door and the animated voices of his family members talking and exclaiming outside. Indeed Embuta had come and was knocking loudly at his door. Achamba got up and realized that his well-written poem was only a mirage. But the dream version was still fresh in his mind. Had he not been obliged to go outside, he would have successfully reproduced it verbatim. He would do that later, he thought.

When he opened the parlour door and went out, Achamba met a tense-looking Embuta, standing supported by his crutches. Upon setting eyes on his son, Embuta heaved a sigh of relief, for that meant that his family was intact. With a night that had instilled such great fear in them one was not sure of what could possibly have happened to anyone. The rest of the frightened family members were in the courtyard talking excitedly and gesticulating in various directions, taking stock of the night's dismal devastation.

It was a spectacle both weirdly attractive and frightening. Many plantain suckers were lying on the ground twisted in disorder; branches had been ripped off pear and plum trees; a few palm trees had been struck dead by lightning; battered elephant grass and other tall grasses, now overturned, lay sleeping; some trees by the side of River Feg had been completely uprooted and dumped, upside-down, into the river. Many people had lost the roofs of their houses, some having been flown far beyond their compounds and left hanging on tree-tops. But except for twisted iron sheets, no roofs were damaged in Embuta's compound.

With the exception of the roar of Dudum Falls and the excited voices of the villagers now awake, the morning appeared so quiet and innocent, in contrast to the boisterous and violent night. People went round reckoning their losses, for every family had lost something, the most common being plantain suckers.

Usobi, Embuta's old friend, came to find out what Embuta's own share of destruction was.

'Look at my backyard. See for yourself how many plantain suckers I still have standing,' said Embuta.

'Your situation is even better,' replied Usobi. 'In my compound there is nothing left standing. All plantains and trees have been levelled down.'

'Palm trees and raffia palms have been burnt and plantains destroyed. Just look behind that house, follow my finger. What does all this mean?' wondered Embuta aloud.

'Hunger and death,' replied Usobi. 'That's what it means, hunger and death.'

'Indeed, with the destruction of these food crops it does mean people will starve to death,' affirmed Embuta.

'But it is more than this,' continued Usobi. 'This does not augur well for Dudum. Last night's fury and all this destruction signal more than just hunger and death. They portend the passing away of a great man. An important chief is about to pass away in Dudum.'

'Remember, we are told, a similar catastrophe occurred prior to the death of the greatest Chief Dudum has ever had, Ambikoh, the great grandson of Ngiekum. According to the story handed down to us, on the eve of Ambikoh's death, a terrible storm, rain, thunder and lightning had gripped the whole clan. A week earlier, owls, those birds of ill-omen, in their unusual large numbers, had been hooting their sad messages virtually every night. That was long, very long ago, that was before anyone living now was born. Many generations have passed away since. And now the times have come round again with ominous foreboding. Whose death it is this time remains the question,' ended Usobi.

'You're right,' added Embuta. 'This portends something terrible for Dudum.'

Just then the two men heard the distant but clear notes of Akaya's *ndek* beating the type of mournful message heard only during an obituary. They pricked their ears to pick up the urgent message. It was Akaya sending, to the villages of Upper Dudum, the sad message of the night's devastation. At the end of Akaya's drum message, came that of Chief Umeitoh, much nearer home. The disaster was the same in Akan, it said. Indeed, it was even worse there, for it had left a sacred tree, around Dudum Falls, lying buried in a landslide.

The word soon got round Akan that the great rain had not only wrought havoc on the people, but it had visited the resting sacred place of Ngiekum, the enchanted Dudum Falls. One of the sacred trees around the frothing pool at the falls had actually been uprooted. Many curious villagers made for the falls to see things for themselves. Achamba was among them.

They soon arrived to join those already there. They could not believe that such a huge tree could have been uprooted. But it was true. There it lay, its powerful roots exposed and its branches partially buried in the swirling pool that was the river bed.

The action that caused the displacement of that tree could only have been qualified as wild. For nothing short of brute violence could have forced out those powerful roots from their base. Yet there were no signs that such an act was the work of man. No. It was supernatural; it was the work of the gods or the ancestors. The spot where the tree used to stand, at the base of an escarpment, now looked like a huge crater. A great landslide had occurred around it also.

The villagers pointed to it and said it was the former dwelling place of an ancestor. And that what had happened was that one of the ancestors had merely moved house; he had gone out of one dwelling spot onto another, very likely under one of the remaining sacred trees still standing. The villagers agreed that the deracination of the sacred tree was a bad omen.

While at the falls people shouted at the top of their voices to be barely heard... *Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim - Dim* ... The drumming of the falls was deafening particularly that morning. All the streams and rivulets, themselves quite full, swelled River Feg whose muddy water came surging forward before plunging over the edge of the Dudum cliff and then striking the river bed below.

This produced wild, foaming torrents that rose in a cloud-like mist which the people called smoke. Ngiekum's dwelling place, they held, was supposed to be in the heart of those torrents covered by the mist. Beyond this were the swirling currents spreading in various directions. The striking and rebounding water produced constant showers that gave the impression of continuous rainfall around the falls.

Under the spell of the deafening roar of Dudum Falls and the constant showers settling on surrounding vegetation, Achamba was revisited by those last night's uncanny voices. His ears were invaded by screams and cries, and also by the mournful funeral sounds of the *ndek*. He felt scared and uncomfortable, and then he hastened to join men already returning to the village.

As they headed home, the villagers were commenting on the significance of the great rain and the fall of the sacred tree.

‘The world is soon coming to the end,’ began one man. ‘The dreadful rain and the storm can only point to greater disaster to come.’

‘True,’ put in another. ‘The uprooting of the sacred tree is a sign that a strong man is going to die in Dudum. And this won’t be long from now. By the time the year runs out, a sadder event will take place in Dudum.’

The farther they got away from the falls, the less the intensity of their roar and the more the disturbing voices in Achamba’s mind diminished. And then he thought of the poem. Ah, yes, the poem! He was going straight home to reproduce his poem!

But when he tried to recite it, he could not remember a thing. Tried as he could, he was unable to recall a complete stanza of what he thought had been well-written out in his dream. He could barely recollect a few lines. Achamba was disappointed, for he had not thought his poem would disappear that easily and so soon. He hurried home to put together the few slippery patches he could still dredge up from the dark recesses of the unconscious with those he had scribbled on the sheets of paper.

As he tried to rework the scrawled lines around the few recalled ones, it dawned on Achamba that the actual poetic composition was a more exacting task, after all. It was not as easy as he had fancied. He laboured hard on it for hours. He wrote and rewrote; he read and reread; he crossed out this or that word. Indeed, he modified whole phrases or an entire stanza. And when he copied it out neatly on a new sheet, the end product of his poetic endeavours read as follows:

Elemental Fury

*When I hear the rain pounding on my roof
And then pattering on the window pane,
When the trees swing in the dark,
And creak under the force of the storm,
I fear the forces of nature are around.*

*When lightning flashes and thunder roars
And men fall down to avoid the blow,*

*When a thunderbolt breaks the ribs of men
And dismembers them limb by limb,
I fear the elements of fury are unchained.*

*When I hear in the howling of the wind
And in the drumming of Dudum Falls
The wailing of bereaved mothers,
And the groan of separated lovers,
I fear the agents of doom are at large.*

*Then secure in my world within,
I reinforce my doors and thank
My ancestors for the calm
That reigns in my homestead,
Invoking them to instil in my
Slumbering inmates and me sounder sleep
So that we may know nothing
Of the elemental fury
That has gripped the world without.*

Achamba read the poem aloud to himself several times. Though inspired by destruction, the poem turned out, consciously or unconsciously, to be a plea for protection in the midst of a catastrophe. Within the background of the ominous foreboding now looming over Dudum, his poetic effort ended up as a lyrical supplication to his ancestors for familial and personal safety.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The day after the tempest was Achamba's third day at home. The following day was *Njed*, the day he would take a Land rover from Akan to Mbambe. He was more anxious than ever to get back to Mbambe, but he still had a whole night to spend at home. Achamba wondered how Echunjei felt.

The dream his father had narrated to him, and his tone of voice in that narration, the stormy night, and the ominous fall of the sacred tree - all of these - played on his thoughts, feelings, and imagination to put him in an apprehensive mood. Somehow he now wished he had listened to Echunjei's warning voice. He secretly wished he had not come home. In fact had he the means of transportation he would have set out for Mbambe there and then. But since he had none he had to endure another night at home.

That night all of Dudum was yet to get over the shock of the night before. Most people went to bed still nervous. There was a kind of malaise hanging over Dudum, a vague fear of the unknown hovering over the clan. The atmosphere was quiet, yet so tense that Dudum was like a tightened bow about to snap at any moment. At Embuta's homestead, perhaps driven by this undefined fear, everyone went to bed earlier than usual. Achamba blew out his lantern lamp at about 9.30 p.m. and went under his blanket.

As he lay awake, he intentionally coaxed sleep by attempting to recite the poem he had composed on the subject of the violent storm. But he succeeded in reciting only two stanzas. That did not matter. After all the whole well-written poem was in his shirt-pocket. He merely wanted the mental effort to tire his brain and thus send him to sleep more quickly. And he succeeded. After a few ineffectual attempts to recite the poem completely, he fell asleep, and slept for five hours.

But as he lay sleeping those savage forces of his poem were once more at work without; only that this time it was their reincarnation. They had taken the form of dehumanized monsters. The wind, the storm, the rain and the lightning had been born again

in the more deadly form of murderers lurking around Embuta's compound. Masked and armed with lethal weapons the dark forces of evil patiently waited, biding their time.

After the second cock crow, around the wee hours of the morning, Achamba had an urge to urinate. He very reluctantly got out of bed, slipped his feet into his fur slippers and got his torch. He opened the inner door and made for the parlour door. When he reached there, he almost instinctively turned back to return to bed, but since the desire to make water had now increased with his nearness to the door, he stealthily opened the door and went out. He swung the powerful beam of his torch this way and that way, and saw nobody. Then he walked a respectable distance before urinating.

When he had finished and was about to return to the house, he thought he heard a noise. He listened intently. Yes, some hurried footsteps. And when he swung his torchlight in the direction of the sounds, the beam fell on two dark figures with raised bars. A powerful wave of shock went through Achamba and he asked aloud, 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

As he quickened his steps towards the door, the masked figures made for it too and soon gained on him. By the time his right foot was about to land on the threshold, a violent blow from the iron bar landed on the back of his head. Achamba let out a chilling scream that sent shock waves through members of Embuta's family, including Embuta himself. He fell, face-down, on the threshold. His assailants fell on him, administering him more savage blows on his head, shoulders and back. They stabbed him twice on his left side and then vanished as he lay groaning and bleeding profusely.

Embuta grabbed his lamp, lighted it, and then clasping it against one of his crutches, flung open his door. He hurriedly and clumsily hobbled onto the spot where his son lay groaning. With bamboo torches and hurricane lamps, members of his household soon joined him.

When they beheld Achamba lying in a pool of blood and moaning in pain, they raised a loud hue and cry. The women and children began wailing. Embuta tried in vain to get a word out of his dying son. He screamed as he shook him, 'What is it? Who is it? Who has done this to you?' He turned Achamba's face upwards and repeated the same questions. Achamba seemed to be making a futile effort

to respond. He barely lifted his hand and made a sign of two in a vain attempt to describe the assassins. And then the hand dropped helplessly.

Embuta gripped his crutches and moved hurriedly towards his calling drum. When he got to the shed of the drum, he lowered himself onto the stool in front of the *ndek*, and then placed his crutches aside. From the drum he quickly fished out two beating sticks with which to deliver the mournful message to all of Dudum.

The first beat was the signal tone for an obituary which he struck five times before proceeding to the message proper... *Kiri-kwim- Kiri-kwim- Kiri-kwim- Kiri-kwim*.

I'm dead! ... I'm finished ... The one-legged man is finished. His two hands, his only precious possessions, have been cut off. Yes, Achamba, son of Embuta, is no more! Achamba, son of Embuta is lying in his blood, dead! Achamba the bookman has been slaughtered by evil men. Akan, Dudum, come and mourn for me. I'm dead! I'm finished. My two hands have been cut off. Achamba, son of Embuta, is no more. Akan, Dudum, come and mourn for the one-legged man. Achamba, son of Embuta is dead! Achamba is dead! Achamba is dead! Dead! Dead! Dead! Dead!

Embuta raised his hands to his head, and clasping it with both hands, he screamed in the manner of an adult weeping: 'Wooueee! Wooueee! Wooueee! I'm dead without illness.'

Drummers in Akan, in the neighbouring villages and, eventually, in all of Lower Dudum, picked up the sorrowful message and, in turn, began to beat their drums to transmit it. Similarly, drummers from the nearest Upper Dudum village to Akan, Abang, relayed the sad news to villages of Upper Dudum.

With a very heavy heart and still incredulous, Chief Akaya, Achamba's father-in-law, reluctantly transmitted the tragic message over his *ndek* to all of Anjong and the adjoining villages in Upper Dudum. The relay baton, so to speak, was then picked up by other villages. And so all of Dudum, in the early hours of that tragic morning, came to know of Achamba's passing away, thanks to the drum communication.

Thus within minutes of Embuta's sad message, the whole of Dudum with its 19 villages, was now aware of Achamba's death. Within minutes of Achamba's murder, all of Dudum groaned. The

tightened bow had finally snapped; the tense atmosphere that had enveloped Dudum had finally given way; the much-dreaded, if undefined, Dudum doom had come to pass.

Achamba's friends and well-wishers who got the right interpretation of the drum message were preparing to travel to Akan. But most of them were held back by fear. Places were still dark, and the murderers might still be exploiting the darkness. So, these sympathizers waited for complete daylight before going to Akan.

However, those from Akan, particularly from the adjoining compounds to Embuta's, braved the darkness and with bamboo torches and hurricane lamps, they walked stealthily to Embuta's homestead to swell the ranks of mourners already there. But when dawn finally came, Akan was in a pandemonium. The inhabitants of the whole village were streaming in their numbers to Embuta's compound.

Akan, in particular, and Dudum in general, was caught up in a great lamentation: the loss of a son of the native soil. There were screams here, and exclamations there; there were heart-rending shrieks here and loud groans there. There were women and children wailing, while young men, choked with emotion, shed tears. Elderly men stood stunned, too stunned and stupefied for tears.

Among mourners who arrived at daybreak were Chief Akaya, his *chinda* and Ubeno on the one hand, and Chief Umeitoh, his own *chinda* and Abaago, on the other. Chief Akaya could not believe what he had heard and in turn transmitted. So, he came to see things for himself. The whole courtyard was jammed with mourners. Chief Akaya was led to the parlour where Achamba's body had been cleaned and placed on a mat on the floor. Some early mourners had been sent to go and bring a nurse from the Anjong Health Centre.

Achamba's badly badged head was still bloody while the two wounds on his left side remained gapingly fresh. Chief Akaya took in a long breath and shook his head incredulously. 'Who is it that has done this cold thing?' he asked looking in the direction of Embuta sitting on a bench and comforted by his old friend Usobi. Embuta freed his left hand from Usobi's grip and raised his both hands upwards in response to the Chief's rhetorical question.

Outside more and more mourners continued to arrive. In several spots in the courtyard small groups of weeping women could be seen around the bereaved family members. One such group

surrounded Achamba's mother, Ekiafang, who, extremely distraught with grief, was now partially naked. Four women, two holding each arm, restrained her from doing herself harm.

Upon setting eyes on Chief Akaya, Ekiafang took the restraining women by surprise. In a split second she broke loose from the four women and leapt into the air and then came down to the ground, landing on her back! There was consternation as people first scattered in various directions before coming back to their senses. They rushed back to the spot where she had fallen.

Many thought she had died as she lay immobile on the floor. Loud shrieks went up as mourners burst into greater weeping and wailing. But more experienced people pushed them away from the fallen woman to allow her some fresh air. After sometime, she regained her consciousness to the relief of many.

Meanwhile the nurse from Anjong Health Centre arrived to prepare Achamba's body for eventual transportation to the mortuary of the Provincial Hospital, to allow for funeral arrangements to be made before due interment. Since Achamba had been a civil servant, his burial was the sole responsibility of the government.

Accordingly, Chief Akaya despatched two young men to Mbambe with a letter to the Principal of Government High School Mbambe, and another to the Headmaster of Government School Mbambe where Echunjei worked. As far as Echunjei was concerned, he instructed the messengers to keep mum about the death. Yes, not a word about it. Echunjei should be kept ignorant of what had happened. The letters carried clear instructions on how she would be properly prepared for the sad news.

It would take the young people some three hours to walk the distance between Dudum and Mbambe. The vehicles to come from Bamenda to Akan market had not yet arrived. In any case it was still too early to expect vehicles from Bamenda to be around. If Akaya had to depend on these vehicles, the Principal of GHS Mbambe would come to know about Achamba's death only very late in the day. Akaya and the others had to act fast so as not to allow the body to begin to decompose.

The nurse from Anjong was now through with the preliminary medical treatment of the corpse. It had been washed and injected to prevent early decomposition. The nostrils and ears were stuffed

with cotton; the gaping wounds were dressed; and the head was bandaged. The body, now dressed with a set of fresh clothes, was placed on Achamba's white-sheeted bed that had been brought from the inner room and placed in the parlour. Four lighted candles were placed on the four angles of the bed. The body was lying face-up. Occasionally the nurse would squirt a jet of perfume over it.

The parlour was jammed with weeping relatives, friends and sympathizers who had just arrived. As they filed past Achamba's remains they were told that after doing so they should go out to make room for new arrivals.

The vast courtyard was literally invaded by mourners. It was a motley gathering of men and women, boys and girls; the young, the old, all of them were united by one great grief: the lamentation of Achamba's death. The passing away of Achamba had occasioned an unprecedented outpouring of grief.

With the exception of the loss of a paramount Chief, an event which came under a unique tradition of mourning, no other death in living memory had caused that much.

All of this was due to Achamba's unique place in the clan as a selfless, progressive elite, as the President of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association, as the son-in-law of a major Chief, as the most highly educated son of the soil, and, above all, as a charismatic and free-handed young man whose attitude towards his people was guided by the principle 'malice towards none, but charity for all.'

The question of who killed Achamba was mooted again and again, but there was no satisfactory answer forthcoming. The most the people gathered was that he appeared to have been killed by two unknown assailants. This was all that Embuta told them following the hint from his son's sign of two. In this regard Embuta himself was no more informed than any other person.

If Achamba was considered a Dudum son of the soil, the village of Ajei, in Lower Dudum, had a special claim over him. Ajei was the village of Achamba's mother. Traditionally, if Achamba or any of his brothers were to kill a game in a hunt, the foreleg of such an animal would go to their maternal uncles in Ajei.

Therefore, when they heard that their 'hunter-nephew' had died, the people of Ajei concerted together for the clarification of the role that was theirs in the circumstance. Though elderly men and

women from Ajei were moving towards Embuta's compound like the others from all over Dudum, the funeral-warrior dancers from Ajei did not leave their village until the time was ripe for their departure for Akan.

And when it came, they left Ajei, armed with machetes, spears and dane guns. They wore fibre skirts around their waists, rattles on their ankles, and skull-caps on their heads from which were dangling red feathers. Their bodies, spotted with white-wash, were bare, with their sheathed machetes hanging down their left flank. Five or six of them carried special drums and other musical instruments. On the whole there were about thirty able-bodied men who set out from Ajei around midday, singing funeral war-songs.

At first they moved very briskly, but when they were within sight of Akan, their brisk walk changed into a trot and then into a full run. Within a short time they reached Akan, running swiftly and raising their funeral war-song, *Ayén*, to a high pitch. There was great commotion in all of Akan, especially in homesteads adjoining Embuta's compound. Like the tempest that had visited Dudum two days earlier with its disastrous effects still visible, the funeral warriors stormed compounds in Akan, slashing down plantain suckers and fronds from raffia palms. They butchered any live animal that came their way and carried it along: goats, pigs or fowls, especially fowls. The wild funeral song they sang, their tempestuous movement from compound to compound with the destruction they left in their wake - all of these - caused consternation that sent the huge crowd of mourners in Embuta's courtyard, particularly women and children, stampeding in all directions.

When the warriors arrived in Embuta's homestead, the crowd, with the exception of the male mourners, had virtually scattered. The warriors dropped their booty in the centre of the courtyard. This consisted of slaughtered goats, pigs, fowls and bunches of plantain. The warriors were then shown into the parlour where Achamba's remains lay. They stood silent around the body and then took a long look at it until their leader gave a heart-rending scream. And then in a chorus the rest burst out in a scream, asking the inevitable questions: 'Who has done this? Who has killed our hunter?'

Then they went out into the courtyard chanting: 'Where is our son? We have come to look for our son. Where is our hunter? We

have come to look for our hunter.' While they chanted, they were screaming in the only manner men could be said to be weeping without actually shedding tears.

After they had thus wept, they settled down to the funeral war-dance, *Ayén*. The drummers took to their instruments, and the dancers encircled them. They danced a series of wild, brisk, war dances, striking and clanking their machetes against one another. At a signal from their leader, they held their guns at the triggers, facing the backyard ready for firing. There was a momentary stampede in the crowd. And then from the over 25 loaded guns there came a sustained barrage of gunshots whose intensity deafened many a mourner momentarily: 'Doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! doom! dudum! doom! dudum! doom! doom!' etc. Thus in and beyond Akan, the clan was being reminded, through this funeral gun-firing, of the doom that had befallen Dudum.

Embuta's family provided the warrior dancers with a funeral nanny-goat and a fowl. At the end of their dance, the warriors went back to the parlour and took another mournful look at the corpse of their nephew and then went out again. They then picked up their booty and set out for Ajei, screaming and weeping in their own manner and intoning as before. And then they were out of sight and out of earshot.

Later on some friends, relatives, in-laws and sympathizers began to arrive with food and wine which were served to mourners according to their villages and quarters. Given the large number of mourners present, no one expected to eat or drink to his fill. It was merely a light meal. But neither Embuta nor Ekiafang tasted of the collation. They were so grief-stricken that their appetite for food was simply not there. They stared unseeingly at the food placed in front of them. Entreaties from sympathisers that the bereaved couple hold their stomachs with something went unheeded.

As the mourners ate the snack, there were sobs and occasional shrieks here and there in the courtyard. In various corners where they ate, many mourners began commenting on Achamba's death linking it to the recent ominous happenings in Dudum.

'I knew that the bad storm that visited us was not for nothing,' said one man as he addressed the group in which he was eating. 'It simply signalled that a great man was going to pass away. I told my

neighbours that the year would not run out before an important man would die in Dudum. But who could have thought that it would be Achamba? And wonder of all wonders, that he would be murdered in cold blood in his father's compound here at home! That a child who has been working outside the clan for most of the time should be killed in his own home where he should be most protected! What is the world coming to? What terrible thing has this child done to such a person to deserve this horrendous murder?'

'My brother,' put in another speaker, 'I cannot believe that we are living at home here with murderers in our midst. What does such a killer intend to gain by murdering Achamba? He has only made Dudum poorer for losing such a son.'

'When we heard the sacred tree had fallen, and we went and witnessed it with our own eyes,' added a third mourner, 'we were sure that an event of tragic proportions was about to occur in Dudum, something more than just the physical destruction caused by the violent storm.'

'Never since we were children has a thing like the events of these recent days taken place in Dudum,' put in a fourth mourner.

That afternoon Akan market did not function. There was simply no market because of nothing to sell. All of Akan had moved to Embuta's compound. Two Land rovers had come down from town. The oil traders who had hired the vehicles were disappointed for coming to the market on that day.

'What type of death is this that has stopped a whole market from functioning?' One of the traders was heard complaining. 'Who is this important man, or is your Chief missing?'

'In a sense he was a chief,' replied a Dudum man. 'Or rather, he was more than a chief. Achamba, son of Embuta, was a man of great learning and the President of Dudum Cultural and Development Association. He was also a civil servant, a high school lecturer. All of Dudum is down here today, in his father's compound'.

'You must have had a bad storm recently. It has destroyed some of the sheds in the market. Even as we came down right from Tinako'o, Etwii and Anjong, we noticed trees pushed down and

houses losing their roofs,' commented the second trader, looking at the sheds and shacks with twisted roofs or none at all.

'You're right,' answered a Dudum man. 'A terrible storm visited us two days ago with the sad results you've seen. It was a storm like none that we have ever had before. We now believe that unique storm was the harbinger of the tragic loss Dudum has registered now. That storm was merely the messenger of bad news for Dudum. The violent storm and the heavy rain that fell on the eve of Achamba's murder were not just natural forces. They were sent.'

'You said this big man was murdered?' asked the first trader.

'Yes,' answered the Dudum man. 'Murdered at night in his father's compound, in cold blood.'

'By whom?'

'Nobody knows.'

'Did they carry away any property?'

'No, nothing, we were told. The killers went away taking nothing. Robbery did not seem to be their motive.'

'You Dudum people are wild. Kill your own brother?'

'Well, we don't know. No one knows whether the murderers are Dudum people or not...'

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the ambulance from Mbambe. In it were five people: the driver, the Principal of GHS Mbambe, the Headmaster of GS Mbambe, and the two young men sent by Chief Akaya.

The ambulance, with its big red cross boldly painted on its front and sides, drove right up to Embuta's compound. When mourners saw it and were told that it had come to transport Achamba's body to town, many, especially women, began weeping louder again. The Principal and his group were shown into the parlour where the corpse lay.

And they were moved by what they saw, Achamba's body, now swollen in a gruesome way. Tears filled their eyes. The Principal pulled out a handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers and wiped his eyes. The Headmaster did same.

This was somebody who had been with them just a few days before. And now he was gone. Just like that. Gone forever! It could have been anyone else; it could have been any of them. What was life all about? What was it, anyway? Achamba, a charismatic high school teacher, was gone forever!

The Principal was too moved to say much. He barely communicated what he told the bereaved families through an interpreter: 'That his colleague's body will be taken to the mortuary of the Provincial Hospital in Bamenda for proper arrangements to be made before official burial. The latter will take place in a week's time. So the families should be making their own preparations while official ones will be under his charge. That following instructions in the letter from Chief Akaya, he had not yet informed Achamba's wife, Echunjei, of the bad news. That this...'

At this point Achamba's mother and other close family members interrupted the translation with a loud outburst of weeping. The Principal and the translator waited for a long time for the mourners to calm down again before continuing.

'That this will be done carefully later.' Then Chief Akaya chose six young men to accompany the corpse to town. The body was lifted and put on a bed in the ambulance, and as this was being done, nearly all the mourners were weeping again.

Later in the afternoon, after conferring with Chief Akaya and Embuta with regard to details about the last rites, and after getting no more details from the bereaved families than that Achamba was probably murdered by two unidentified assailants, the Principal and his team drove off with Achamba's remains to the Mortuary of the Provincial Hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Achamba's tragic death raised many unanswered questions in the minds of many people in Dudum. Chief Akaya, Achamba's father-in-law, was one of those confounded by the murder of the high school teacher. As he pondered over the young man's premature death, Akaya's mind was a basket full of questions: Would Achamba have died the way he did had he remained in Mbambe? Would he have died the way he did had he come home a week earlier rather than later, or vice versa? What would have happened had he not come home at all? Had he been lured outside by his assailants? Did Achamba know anything about his murderers? Had the attackers been trailing him all the way from Mbambe, or were they people in Dudum? What was the object of the murder? Certainly not money or property because nothing in the house was touched. What then could it have been? Jealousy, rivalry, competition or what?

Could Achamba's political enemies in Akan have been behind the homicide? Could Abaago's hand have been behind it? What about Eziaga, Echunjei's jilted fiancé? Was he part of the conspiracy? Could the traditional rivalry between Akan and Anjong, as key villages of Dudum, have been the source of Achamba's death?

Might Achamba have created enemies, at his workplace in Mbambe, who pursued him to settle their scores? If so why take the risk to follow him home? Why not eliminate him at the level of Mbambe? why?... why?... why this? why that? why? why?

These and many more were the countless unanswered questions that filled Chief Akaya's mind. From his own accumulated experiences, Chief Akaya had come to believe firmly that life was full of more hardship than comfort, more struggles than moments of joy or happiness; that life was an endless struggle for survival.

He had come to be suspicious of extreme joy, convinced that whenever one was happy, very happy, one's full enjoyment of the moment was limited by the thought that grief was just around the corner. To him joy and grief were two sides of the same coin, with

grief being the more exposed side. This was the philosophy he had tried to instil very subtly in his children.

Yet, not even the solid foundation provided by that philosophy had prepared him enough for his son-in-law's sudden death. That a young man, barely 33 years old, and eleven years Echunjei's elder, should be slain in the prime of youth, was a sad concretization of a belief he himself could no longer fathom. So, Achamba's rapid rise to socio-cultural prominence in Dudum and his joyful marriage to Echunjei were only the concluding scenes of a happy phase after all. Little did the young man know that sadness was the theme of the next phase to conclude his brief life.

As he lay tossing himself in bed on the night of the second day following Achamba's death, Chief Akaya asked himself more puzzling questions about life. A young man in whom reposed the hopes of the clan, to be killed before his dreams and those of the clan were realized... Dying and leaving behind a young pregnant wife!

What unpardonable crime had Echunjei committed to deserve the burden of early widowhood? Here he was, a village Chief, still waxing strong, with four wives and many children and grandchildren. But there was his daughter, Echunjei, yet to bring forth her first child but was already a widow. What transgression beyond pardon had she committed to merit this ill-luck?

What was this thing called life? You were born, you struggled and died. You were born, you grew old and died. Others were born; they did not grow old and they died. Some were born to die very young. Others died before they were even born.

What was this thing called life, anyway? It was not enough to call it an endless struggle for survival. Why? Because some did not even have the chance to struggle. They were born to die on the very day, and others died in their mother's womb. And yet, and this was the mystery of it all, and yet others were born to go on living beyond life. They outlived their utility to their families and humanity, begging death to come and relieve them, but it would not come.

Saints and angels died, and so did devils and villains. Good and decent people died, but so did bad and immoral ones. But by and large, it was the wicked ones, the villains and the evil ones, who seemed to prosper more as the world knew it. What was this mystery called life?

Akaya wondered what innocent Achamba had done to die so young while there were many wicked people still waxing strong? What had Echunjei done to be so saddled with early widowhood while her own grandparents were still alive and kicking? Why the ill-luck? Why the misfortune? Why? Why?

As he reflected on his daughter's lot, Chief Akaya eventually fell asleep. But Echunjei, the object of his thoughts, was still unaware of her fate; she was yet to be informed of her husband's death. But unknown to her the ambulance conveying the remains of Achamba had passed through Mbambe to the Mortuary of the Provincial Hospital in Bamenda.

Since the obituary was to be announced over the Provincial Radio Station, the Principal of GHS Mbambe decided to work very fast, lest the cat be let out of the bag before its time. He would prepare Echunjei's mind for the bad news before it got to her.

So, with the help of some hospital staff, he had Achamba's body well-taken care of in the mortuary before driving back to Mbambe in the late afternoon. The corpse was not yet in the freezer. He got four women, all of them Echunjei's colleagues in GS Mbambe, to whom he disclosed the sad news, and the role they would play in preparing Echunjei for it. After rehearsing what they would say and do to Echunjei, the women made for her house.

But midway to her residence they halted, and then retreated to confer again. It would be imprudent, they said, if they all trooped into her parlour. Their number might alarm her and raise her suspicion. One of them would go in while the others would linger discreetly, and out of view, in the background. They would then show up, as if naturally, when the next step came.

Echunjei, who was anxiously waiting for her husband that day, was knitting in the parlour. She had prepared him his favourite dish, *ndole* and ripe plantains which she preserved in a food flask. Despite her fairly advanced state of pregnancy, she looked gorgeous and sweet. The parlour windows had a good view that made it possible for her, from where she was sitting, to spot anyone coming to her house from afar. She therefore occupied the particular seat to easily detect the arrival of her husband. That was why she had spotted the four women before they retreated to reduce their number. But it had not bothered her much since she did not know where they were finally going.

But as soon as she saw the lone woman strolling into her parlour and the way she did so, a faint, a very faint, wave of shock went through her, a signal that there was something amiss. True, the woman who walked into her sitting room was not a stranger. But why was she coming to her house now? She was clearly part of the company of four. But why had they first retreated before one woman came back alone? Where were the others? Such were the questions that bothered Echunjei.

‘Afternoon, Madam,’ the visitor greeted as soon as she got in after knocking at the door.

‘Afternoon, sis,’ Echunjei responded. ‘Please sit down. How are you?’

‘Fine, thank you. And you?’

‘Well, fine too.’

‘Is Oga in?’ the visitor asked.

‘No, he isn’t. Why are you looking for him?’

‘Well, I just wanted to find out something from him concerning a literature assignment he gave my son.’

‘He went home. But he should be coming back anytime from now.’

‘By what means is he travelling?’ the visiting woman asked.

‘Today is Akan market. He should be travelling by one of the Land rovers that went down to Dudum.’

‘I see... Yes, today is Akan market. Have you heard that a Land rover has had an accident at Acha Tugi?’

‘No,’ answered Echunjei, as a painful sensation swept through her. ‘When did that take place?’

‘This afternoon,’ replied the visitor. ‘But we do not know whether the vehicle was from Dudum or from Njikwa.’

‘Was it a bad accident?’ Echunjei asked worriedly.

‘I don’t know,’ answered the woman. ‘I only heard that all those involved have been transported to the hospital in Bamenda.’

Echunjei threw aside the shawl she had been knitting and rose from her chair. She went to her room and was soon back. She was wearing a flowery *kabba* and a pair of fur slippers. She called her houseboy and her younger sister and gave them some instructions before going out.

'Where are you going to, Madam?' the woman asked.

'I want to go and ask the Principal. Maybe he knows something about the accident.'

'We go together,' the woman offered to accompany Echunjei to the Principal's house.

The distance between Achamba's residence and the Principal's was a short one. Both women covered it in the reasonable length of time that a pregnant woman like Echunjei would take without raising an alarm. Thank God the Principal was in. Yes, he had heard of the accident.

'But I don't know whether the vehicle was coming from Dudum or Njikwa,' he lied.

'Well, I know that today is Akan market day. There's no market in Njikwa today. Today is neither Nkun nor Kuttin market day,' said Echunjei. 'So, that Land rover must have come only from Dudum since today is Akan market day. My husband went home and was bound to return today by the Land rover from Akan market'.

At this point a woman came in, followed a while later by another. One of them said she had also heard of the accident and that all those involved had been taken in an ambulance to the Provincial Hospital for emergency treatment.

'Yes, the Land rover was from Dudum,' she confirmed.

'Aha I said it!' exclaimed Echunjei with emotion. 'Mr. Principal what do I do? I'm certain that my husband was to travel from Dudum to Mbambe by the Land rover. My blood tells me my husband was involved in that accident. Please help me.'

'In what way, Madam?'

'Take me in your school vehicle to the Provincial Hospital to have a look at the victims of the accident.'

'Well, if you are quite sure that Mr. Achamba was to come from Dudum today, I'll be willing to help you. We'll drive to town. In that case is Madam ready?'

'Yes, but we should pass through my house for me to say something to my younger sister.'

The Principal got the car documents, went and started the engine and then drove the vehicle out of the garage into the yard. He opened the front door for Echunjei who got in and sat by his side. The other three women asked the Principal if they could accompany them.

‘You are free to, if you like,’ he encouraged them. ‘At least the vehicle is empty.’

They drove away and halted at Achamba’s house for Echunjei to talk to her younger sister. By the time she returned to the vehicle, another woman had joined them. Echunjei did not take particular notice of her. But the fourth woman sat in front with her in addition to the Principal. Echunjei was thus hemmed in between the Principal and the woman.

The women behind them started a conversation intended to divert Echunjei’s attention, but she was not interested in it, her mind wholly centred on the accident. Could her husband have been badly wounded? Could he have come out without a scratch? But if so why had he not asked to be dropped at Mbambe? Or, worst of all, could he have been killed in the accident?

If he had been in the vehicle, he could only have suffered one of two things: either he had been badly injured or he had died. These were the only possibilities that would have made it necessary for Achamba to be taken straight to the Provincial Hospital without stopping at Mbambe. Could any of these women with her have known anything more about her husband’s fate? But why were all of them accompanying her to town anyway? Just out of sisterly solidarity? Maybe.

And as Echunjei asked herself these disturbing questions, it dawned on her that there were four women in the vehicle taking her to Bamenda. She turned around and looked at each of them, convinced that they were, indeed, the very women who, on the way to her residence earlier, had retreated to send but one woman. Her heart began to throb disturbingly. Turning to the woman sitting by her Echunjei asked, ‘Sister, why are you four accompanying me to town?’ The woman was slightly embarrassed, but she quickly replied:

‘There’s enough space in the car. Plus it’s just polite for us to keep you company. It may just be possible that friends or relatives of ours are involved in the accident.’

‘Sisters, tell me the truth,’ she pleaded as with scared eyes she turned and looked at those behind. ‘Please let me know if something has happened to my husband.’

‘We know nothing more than the general information we all already know,’ one of the woman behind her lied.

'If so, why did three of you return when you were first heading for my house to send only one person? Tell me, why did you do that? I saw you. I'm now convinced that you four know something more about my husband's accident.'

'Madam, we don't,' said the woman in front without much conviction.

'Sisters, tell me, is this a planned act?'

'What?'

'Your coming along with me to town.'

'No. Please, Madam, calm down yourself. Is it a bad thing, if there is free transportation, for us to keep you company? What are good friends for?'

'I hope you're really good friends and honest with me. But my blood tells me something else.'

The Principal was glad he was not the one being badgered with those questions. He did not know what convincing answers to give Echunjei but concentrated all his attention on the steering wheel, for the road was full of bends and potholes. He was quite aware that among the women in the vehicle was one pregnant, Echunjei. Any miscalculation might cause a disastrous bump. His air of concentration discouraged Echunjei from dragging him into their conversation. After all they were going to check on victims of a car accident; it would be imprudent for him to create another one through careless talking.

After about forty minutes, they arrived in town and drove straight to the Emergency Ward in the hospital. There they were told that no vehicle had brought in victims of a car accident. Indeed no cases of an accident had been referred to them for two days.

'But if you are so worried about a patient, you can check in the male or female ward,' the nurse on duty advised. The group of five women and the Principal went to Ward C.

There they saw men some sleeping calmly, some groaning, and others chatting with visiting relatives. The chatting male patients and those in agony were quickly spotted and examined. Achamba was not among them. Then the group proceeded to those sleeping, moving from bed to bed, with Echunjei in the lead. She studied all of them, but he was not there either.

On their way out of the hospital, they passed through the Emergency Ward again to inform the nurse that they had not found the person they thought was in the hospital.

‘In that case,’ said the nurse, ‘the patient has not been brought here. You better check in a private clinic. Or you follow this corridor, walk straight down there, turn left, and then walk to the grey building you’ll find in front of you.’

‘Which ward is that?’ Echunjei asked.

‘A Special Ward,’ answered the nurse. ‘If you do not find the patient there, then he or she is not in this hospital.’

The nurse shot a quick, conspiratorial glance at the Principal, something unnoticed by the others. The group trooped down the corridor, with the Principal in the rear. Without any of the others noticing it, he turned and looked at the nurse on duty. They briefly communicated through body language only. She nodded in response to his non-verbal message. As they turned left at the bend, the nurse said to herself ‘Poor woman!’, for she knew the fate that awaited Echunjei.

The Bamenda Provincial Hospital was not quite a strange place to Echunjei. But although she had been there before, she had never gone beyond the out-patient section. So when the nurse had said they should check at the ‘Special Ward’ Echunjei took her at her word. She expected thus to find the name of the ward, like those they had just been to, well-written above the door: ‘Special Ward.’

Great was therefore her shock when, exactly on the spot where she expected to find ‘Special Ward’ she read, clearly painted in bold, capital lettering ‘MORTUARY’. Her heart gave a painful throb and she instinctively placed her left hand below her left breast. By the time they were getting on to the threshold, the nurse they had left behind, with two others, had caught up with them. They were all received by the male nurse on the day shift.

Upon inquiry the nurse told them that there were two corpses in the mortuary, male and female. Echunjei’s spirits fell. Her suspicions and worst fears would be confirmed now or not. As they made for the corner where the male corpse lay, she had her heart in her mouth.

In her anxiety she did not notice that three female nurses were practically behind her, indeed almost surrounding her. When they got close enough to the body, Echunjei let out a sharp shriek with

her both arms raised and then clasping her head. Then the arms fell to her sides as she herself was slumping backwards, into the waiting arms of the nurses. They had not allowed her to touch the floor.

A wheel chair that had been standing at a corner was immediately wheeled under her and the nurses helped her into it and started fanning her frantically. As they did so, they rapidly wheeled her to a special ward for special care to be given her by a doctor. There she was put on a bed and placed in a good position to allow for the right circulation of her blood. In that position she thus lay undisturbed for above half an hour, when she began to stir and regain consciousness.

She first opened her eyes and for a while, remained calm. She was aware that she was in a well-lit air-conditioned room, with something medical in its smell. She turned and saw on one side of the bed three nurses. When she looked on the other side, she saw a gentleman with some medical gadgets on his shoulders and in his ears. She lay back on the bed, and a moment later, lifted her head again, and then made to rise up from the bed.

The nurses helped her into a sitting position. She turned from the nurses to the doctor, and then from the doctor to the nurses. It was as if she had been dreaming. But then things began to come out gradually until she was now fully awake and aware of what had happened.

Yes, she was in a hospital, and she had come to look for her husband. Her husband was in the mort ... Echunjei began to weep again.

‘Oh my husband, where is my husband? Where is my husband oo? Take me back to the mortuary! Let me die with my husband! Where is my husband ooo?’

‘Madam!, madam!’ the medical doctor placed his hand on her shoulder and lowered himself to address her. His name, Dr. Tapong, had been stitched with a green thread onto the front pocket of the white jacket he was wearing. Echunjei looked at the name but went on weeping.

‘Doctor,’ she appealed tearfully, ‘please take me back to the mortuary. Let me look at my husband! Oh my husband! Is it true that my husband is dead, Doctor? Let me look at him again! Please, Doctor, take me to the mortuary. Take me to the...’

‘Madam, Madam, Madam!’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘Please, listen to me carefully. Did you really love your husband?’

‘What type of question is that, Doctor?’

‘A question I want you to answer.’

‘Oh, my husband, is my husband really dead, Doctor?’

‘Madam, Madam!’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘Listen! If you really loved your husband, you would not want to do harm to yourself and the child you’re carrying. That child is the bond of the love that was between you and your husband.’

‘But Doctor, you don’t know. Doctor, I want to see my husband. Is he really dead? Please Doctor, let us go back to the mortuary,’ and with that Echunjei rose up and began to make for the door.

But the Doctor and the nurses were on her again. They helped her into the wheel chair.

‘Madam, the place is locked and no one is allowed to go there now,’ said Dr. Tapong. ‘I’m sorry, but your husband’s body will be seen only on the day it will be removed from the mortuary for burial.’

‘Then I won’t see my husband again?’

‘Of course, you’ll see his body on the day of its removal from the mortuary.’

‘And when is that, Doctor?’

‘Well, it’s for the family to decide. In any case the corpse can’t be here for more than a week.’

‘Oh, Doctor!’

‘But, please Madam, listen. Be calm. If you value the child you’re carrying and if you valued the love between you and your husband, please be calm. You know you almost died when you collapsed in the mortuary. Your condition is particularly delicate. I’ll be frank with you, Madam, because I want to save your life and that of the child you’re carrying. You were almost gone when you fell in the mortuary. I had to work very hard on you. Thank God, you came back.

If you were to go back to that condition, you would not survive, nor would the child you’re carrying. If you’re dead, the child in you will be dead too. True, your dear husband has died, but do you want his child to die too? Do you call it love when you kill yourself and the child your husband gave you? I know how great your grief is; I know

how painful it is to lose a beloved one. But please for the sake of the child you're carrying, for the sake of the love that was between you and your husband, calm down yourself. Do you hear me?'

'Yes, Doctor. But Doctor...'

'I say no more weeping, Madam. It is dangerous for you to go on weeping. It is very dangerous for your child. Do you get me, Madam?'

'Yes, Doctor. I do.'

'So, please be calm. O.K.?'

'Yes, Doctor. Yes, Doctor.'

'Fine. If you do that you'll be O.K and your child will be O.K too.'

With that Dr. Tapong went out. He found the four women and the Principal waiting on a bench. He told the Principal that so far luck was on their side. Echunjei was okay, but she still needed some care. She could be taken back to Mbambe, and the task was now theirs. But under no circumstances, Dr. Tapong stressed, should she be allowed to become agitated again. In case of any problem, he added, they should call in the medical officer in charge of the Divisional Hospital in Mbambe. Concluding he stressed that Mrs. Achamba should not be allowed to sleep alone. At least two women would have to be by her side. The women present nodded.

Meanwhile the Principal, while the doctor and the nurses were looking after Echunjei, had gone and dropped the obituary at the Provincial Radio Station, to be read after the 6.30 p.m. News. The text read as follows:

'On behalf of the Hon. Minister of National Education, the Principal of G.H.S. Mbambe sorrowfully announces the sudden and untimely death of Mr. L. A. Achamba, an English Language and Literature teacher of the school. The death occurred on the 15th of April in Dudum. The Hon. Minister of national Education conveys his heart-felt condolences to members of the bereaved families.

'This sad information goes to family members, friends and relatives of the late Achamba, especially to all the elite, sons and daughters of Dudum. For the time-being the body is lying in the Bamenda Provincial Mortuary, pending burial arrangements. The burial programme will be announced later.'

Later on in the evening the Principal, Echunjei and the four women drove back to Mbambe, with Echunjei sobbing all the way. Whenever she attempted weeping aloud, the four women were on her, cautioning her against the danger she would run into if she became agitated. They were neither doctors nor nurses to look after her. Echunjei should not make things worse for them.

By the time the Principal and the women arrived back in Mbambe, the obituary had been read over the national radio network. Everybody had heard it. Sons and daughters of Dudum outside the clan moaned when they heard the news of Achamba's sudden, untimely death.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When he heard the news of Achamba's death, Neba, Achamba's Bafut friend, rushed to the Provincial Hospital. But he was told that he could not have access to the corpse in the mortuary that evening. He returned home disappointed, but very early the next day, he was once more at the mortuary. Moments later the place was opened. But Neba was informed that the corpse, already in the freezer, would be exposed only on the day of its removal.

Thereafter he went to Mbambe to contact Echunjei and the Principal for information about the funeral preparations. He and the Principal shuttled twice between Mbambe and Dudum to consult with Embuta, Chief Akaya, Echunjei and other key family members on the funeral arrangements. When everything was ready, the removal of Achamba's remains from the mortuary was scheduled for the sixth day. The announcement had been made over the radio and all of Dudum was aware of, and ready for, Achamba's burial on that day.

The government had supplied a coffin and a vehicle, a powerful Land Cruiser, to convey Achamba's body to its final resting place. That morning at the mortuary there were delegations of Dudum elite from all over the country, most Dudum elements in Bamenda, all the staff members of GHS Mbambe, members of the Christian Women Fellowship Group (CWF) that had been comforting their probationary member, Echunjei, and keeping her company for close to a week, civil servants, friends of Achamba and Echunjei, and some hospital staff. In short the mortuary was jammed with sympathisers who had come to pay their last respects to the high school teacher.

Of course Echunjei was there. Dressed in a black *kabba* and wearing black shoes, and a black hat, with a light black veil thrown over the hat, Echunjei, tall and dignified, looked as gorgeous as ever. Many wept when they saw her weeping as she stared at the body of her husband for the last time before it was to be put into the casket.

The mortuary staff had worked very hard on it. It had been dressed in a navy blue suit with a bow tie over a white shirt. The corpse was lying face-up, with the arms resting on the thighs. On the hands were white gloves, the two thumbs held together with a white thread. There were also white socks on the feet, with the two major toes held together by means of a white thread. The head, well-bandaged, was lying on a cushion of pillows, but the face was without any damage.

Mourners queued up in a very long line to file past the body. But soon there was no standing space in the room. The crowd was then asked to move out to make room for people who had not yet seen the body. When everyone had filed past it, the corpse was then taken from the mortuary bed and placed in the coffin.

The latter was an excellent piece of work made out of an expensive brown wood, well-varnished. The inside was lined with soft and comfortable cotton material, topped with white lace together with white sheets. Decorated with golden ornaments, it had golden handles, and a glass aperture through which only the face, the neck and the shoulders of the corpse were visible.

The Pastor of the Presbyterian Church Mbambe, the Rev. S. B. Awatt, chose some popular choruses and the Christians present sang with him. He then made some brief remarks about the transitoriness of life in this world and the temporariness of the physical body. Life on earth was transient, he said, but life in heaven was eternal.

Commenting on the mortality of the physical body as opposed to the immortality of the soul, the only thing to return to its maker after the flesh has returned to dust, he said, brothers and sisters in Christ ought to bank more on the spiritual than on the material things. They should take more care of their souls than of their bodies. Yes, their eternal life with Christ Jesus should be their pre-occupation so that when, like Achamba, they would have died physically, they would have nothing to fear because they would have invested in the Lord. They would have been sure of their salvation.

He then chose hymn 529 from the Church Hymnary and asked Christians to sing with him twice only the first stanza:

Courage brother do not stumble.
Though thy path be dark as night
There's a star to guide the humble
Trust in God and do the right.

After the song the Pastor prayed for the safety of Achamba's soul, asking the Lord Almighty to receive him, and to grant to mourners accompanying the corpse home His travelling mercies to and from Dudum.

The funeral procession that left the mortuary premises for the long journey to Dudum consisted of an impressive number of vehicles. At the head of it was the Land Cruiser conveying the casket, festooned with flowers, wreaths and the green *nkeng*, followed by three government Land rovers transporting the staff of GHS, one double cabin Pick-Up truck transporting Echunjei, the Pastor and the CWF group from PC Mbambe, three double cabin Pick-Up trucks transporting the delegation of Dudum elite, one Land rover transporting other mourners, and three open lorries with Dudum elements in Bamenda.

The day before, Dudum people in Bamenda had bought food items like rice, plantains, corn, flour, garri, beans, meat, fish, groundnuts, vegetables and spices and taken to Dudum to start cooking in preparation for the funeral celebration. The men bought many crates of beer, jugs of red wine and bottles of spirits.

Conspicuous, well-wedged and tied on top of the Land Cruiser carrying the coffin was an enlarged coloured picture of the late Achamba in one of his well-tailored blue suits, probably the very one the body in the casket was dressed in. The vehicles in the long line, with their side-lights on, were moving carefully and very close to one another, 'bumper to bumper' so to speak.

Since it was early rainy season, there was neither much mud nor dust. Luckily for the procession it had rained the previous night, so that the road was fairly dry. The parched ground had swallowed up enough of last night's rain water. And apart from some isolated pools of standing water that could easily be dodged by the vehicles, the road was fresh without being slippery, and dry without being dusty. It was just the right period to drive on such a country track without suffering from the effect of much dust nor much mud.

The convoy stopped at Mbambe for an hour to allow Achamba's neighbours to pay him their last respects. Echunjei and the CWF women very close to her collected some items of clothing to take along with them to Dudum. Neba and the Principal completed final arrangements at the level of Mbambe. They bought other food items

not plentiful in Dudum, and hired a young man with a generator to supply electricity and music at the occasion.

Then the procession proceeded, going through the rolling hills and green valleys of the grassland area to Dudum without stopping anywhere. Following the lead by the CWF group, the groups in the various vehicles began singing funeral and gospel songs, each a different dirge. Some sang in English, some in pidgin and others in the Dudum language. Amidst these elegiac tunes, the cars rolled steadily through the narrow, meandering road, their rumbling engines harmonising with the dirges, heightening the solemnity of the funeral motorcade.

By eleven a.m. they had reached Tinako'o, the gate way to Dudum. Here there was a big banner spanning the width of the road and hoisted on two long bamboos. On it and marked in large blue lettering was a message, part in Dudum, part in English: UYAKA DUDUM WELCOME TO DUDUM, HOME OF ACHAMBA The banner had been designed and put up by the executive of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association, DCDA. Palm fronds had been cut and planted on both sides of the road.

The inhabitants of Tinako'o lined both sides of the road partly to welcome Achamba's remains, but also out of curiosity to stare at the unusual convoy of vehicles. They stood without waving, but pointing to the enlarged picture on top of the Land Cruiser and shaking their heads sorrowfully. Many, moved by the mournful songs sung by the procession, wept.

From Tinako'o the cortege got to Etwii before facing the steep downwards swing in the direction of Anjong. As the vehicles rolled slowly down the stony and bumpy hill-side above Ato-Eba, the singing, with no signal from anyone, ceased gradually. The bumps and jerky movement of the vehicles imposed their own type of rhythm on the people. Many who had never travelled on such a scary road were more concerned with their own safety, the drivers concentrating on steering their passengers to that safety.

Early in the procession, while the CWF group had been singing, Echunjei had been weeping. However, with comforting words from the women, her weeping had diminished into sporadic sobs. And by the time the cortege was descending the steep and rocky hillside, these sobs were completely gone.

But at the sight of Anjong school the sobs and tears were gradually returning, and by the time the caravan was driving past the Anjong School Hall with those huge memorable boulders in front of it, Echunjei broke into tears again and started weeping, taking, for a while, the CWF women by surprise. A woman by her instinctively asked ‘Sister, na weti?’ before recollecting herself. The very woman then began to pat her on the back: ‘Wey, make we put everything for God yi hands.’

The junction at Nyeba, where the road forked, not far from Back-To-Land, was jammed with curious villagers who had come out to watch the long line of vehicles from town. Again the main attraction was the enlarged coloured picture of the deceased. Many were the hands pointing at it as the motorcade streamed past down to Akan.

On the branch of the road going to Akan was an impressive archway, built out of palm fronds and bamboos, and decorated with flowers and fresh fibres, wide and high enough to allow vehicles to go through it without any inconvenience. It was the handiwork of the DCDA. Near it was a sign board with an arrow pointing in the direction of Akan.

From here the palm fronds, that had so far been only sparsely planted on both sides of the road, became more plentiful. Many funeral celebrants were walking to Akan, each man with a calabash of raffia wine strapped on his left shoulder, and a dane gun carried on the right. The women carried baskets of food on their heads.

It was obvious to the mourners from town that they were close to their destination. Indeed they were only minutes away from it. Were it not for the very difficult nature of the road from Anjong to Akan, it would have taken the procession not more than ten minutes. But the short distance of two kilometres was covered in about twenty-five minutes.

Chief Akaya and many family members were at Akan market to await the arrival of the people from town. Some of the villagers were weeping when the procession arrived with the enlarged coloured picture conspicuous on top of the Land Cruiser. They told the visitors that owing to lack of enough parking space in Embuta’s compound, only two vehicles would drive right up there. The rest would park in the market square. Luckily the compound was just a short distance away. The vehicles chosen were the Land

Cruiser bearing the coffin, and the double cabin Pick-Up transporting the CWF and Echunjei.

When all the visitors came out of the vehicles parked in the market, they were even more than the maximum population that could have attended the Akan market on any given day. As they walked to Embuta's compound, there was a stir within the immediate neighbourhood.

As soon as the Land Cruiser showed up with the casket, the crowd that had assembled in the compound began to weep afresh. After manoeuvring the vehicle into an impossible parking space, the driver switched off the engine. The second vehicle did similar forward and backward movements and finally came to a stop for the CWF, the Pastor and Echunjei to get out.

When mourners caught sight of the weeping widow clad in black, they went distraught with grief, with some women tearing their hair, and others spreading their arms in despair. Two CWF women were on each side of Echunjei as they led her to the courtyard, holding each of her arms.

Benches had been collected from PC Akan, the main Presbyterian Church in Lower Dudum, an area dominated by the Catholics. Priority for sitting on the benches was given to strangers from town. The seats were all occupied. But the funeral organisers had foreseen this and had had bamboo benches constructed to accommodate the large number of mourners. Yet many people had no comfortable seats. Some therefore sat on stones and tree-trunks, while many others, among them Dudum residents, simply stood.

Amidst great weeping the coffin was brought down from the Land Cruiser and placed in the centre of the courtyard. Achamba's mother, now pale and emaciated, was still being guarded by four women, while Embuta, in the company of Usobi, looked gaunt and pitiful.

As the young man in charge of the generator and some other youths were busy wiring the compound and setting the generator up, Neba, the Principal, Chief Akaya, Embuta, Echunjei, and the leader of the Dudum elite from outside the clan, went into Achamba's parlour to review the printed burial programme. Two executive members of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association were there also. Very briefly they went over the programme and made a few changes.

At the end of their discussion, they were satisfied that everything was almost ready. The grave had been dug, food cooked and piled in various vessels in houses in the neighbourhood, and drinks assembled. It was agreed that as soon as the generator could be operated, the funeral rites would begin since the loud speaker would derive its electrical power from it. In the interim people were despatched to bring the drinks and food items from the vehicles parked in the market.

Since Achamba died, no one had been allowed into his bedroom. Embuta and Chief Akaya had locked it pending the eventual arrival of his wife. So at the end of the brief meeting Echunjei, accompanied by Embuta and her father, went to examine the room. It was still as Achamba had left it that fateful night. And apart from the clothes the corpse was initially dressed in when the nurse had worked on it, every other thing he had brought home was virtually intact.

Echunjei, amidst sobs, inspected everything, turning this or that item and placing it back. As she did so, she caught sight of an envelope sticking out from the pocket of one of the shirts hanging on the wall. She pulled it out. It was not sealed, so she opened it, thinking it was a will or a letter. True, it was addressed to her, and a curious letter at that: neither a will nor a conventional letter; it was a copy of the poem entitled *Elemental Fury*. She decided to read it.

She went through it once without much comprehension. She folded it and put it back in the envelope and clasped it in her hand. But she could not keep it there for long. She soon opened it again and sat down to read it once more. And she did so three times. Then it became clear to her that it was her husband's impression of a horrible night of rain and storm, captured in poetic form for her. It was just like her husband, to communicate to her through a poem.

Echunjei handed it to Neba to see what he thought of it. Neba sat down and read it several times and returned it to her to keep for him. He might need it later, he told her. Again Echunjei clasped the envelope in her hand.

When the generator started working, an announcement was made over the loud speaker that the burial ceremony was about to be tackled; people should therefore be quiet so that the programme

could be followed as drawn up, to allow the visitors from town to return in time. Achamba's father was called upon to deliver a funeral oration on behalf of the family.

Embuta, with the help of his crutches, went and stood by the coffin, facing its glass window. Then through an interpreter he addressed the funeral crowd. 'I thank you all who have come to mourn for my son and to bury him. I have come to bury the man I thought would bury me. (*Sighs in the crowd*) I am alive today thanks to my son. Without him I would since have died long ago. And now that he's gone, you can be sure that my own end is very near.

'While we cannot predict death, it is but normal for a father to expect to be buried by his son. But now it is a father burying his son. But my son has not died a natural death. He was killed in cold blood at midnight in this compound, on the threshold of that door over there. (*Murmur in the crowd as they followed the direction of his finger*) Yes, my son was murdered by two unidentified assassins in my own compound. (*Sighs in the crowd*)

'Ever since people have not ceased coming up to me with many suggestions: "Embuta, go to Batibo and consult the necromancer; Embuta, go to Mamfe Overside and bring the Obasinjong, the witch hunter; Embuta, ask this or that person to give you a live squirrel!"'

'I asked myself, has Achamba become a simple quarrel over a disputed plum tree, or raffia bush to be settled through a squirrel? But neither necromancy, nor Obasinjong, nor a live squirrel can bring my son back to life. In any case none of these suggestions can be carried out before my son is buried. He has to be buried first. But do I look like one who can walk to Batibo, or, much less, to Mamfe Overside?

'My wish is that my son should search for his murderers. Let his ghost haunt them; let his blood give them no rest. Achamba, let your ghost go after those who have taken your life. Give them no rest; give them no peace of mind.

'I'd like to make this declaration. If there is anyone here who was owed by my son or someone whose money my son had borrowed but had not paid it back by the time of his death, let such a person step forward here and declare the amount! ... Well, it looks like there is none. Here ends my talk.'

There was solemn silence when Embuta finished talking. Then as he walked back to his seat some people began to talk in low tones. Chief Akaya was the next to make a statement. And through the same interpreter the Chief said, 'Dudum has lost a genuine son of the soil, and I have lost a beloved son-in-law. By any reckoning my son-in-law whom we have come to bury was a unique and magnificent man. I say this not in the sense that he was a learned man, which he was, nor that he was a great politician, which he wasn't. Had he lived longer on earth he would certainly have attained that position too.

But the late Achamba was unique in a different way. He was selfless and very devoted to the cause of his clan as a whole. A believer in truth and justice, he was generous to a fault. He had the capacity to bring people together, to assemble enemies so that they could begin to exploit ways to bridge the gap between them. The great meeting of Dudum elders and elite that took place in Anjong school was his brainchild.

I only regret what will become of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association, born out of that meeting, and whose first President Achamba was, now that he is gone. The late Achamba was unique in another sense. He was the only person in living memory whose death was heralded by ominous events that rocked Dudum to its very foundation. We all know that the passing away of some great men, or the loss of a chief, is sometimes preceded by some odd events. But what occurred in Dudum on the night before Achamba was to die beats all other bad omens. The dreadful rain, the frightful storm, the terrifying lightning and the large scale devastation that visited Dudum that night were things the clan has never known since we were children.

'The only other person whose death was preceded by an unprecedented catastrophe, we are told, was Ambikoh, the great grandson of our founding father, Ngiekum. Even then we had taken such information as mere hearsay. Until a similar thing happened a week ago, we had dismissed such stories as pure rumour that had nothing to do with reality as we know it.

'Alas we now believe firmly in them. But we also believe that Achamba's death had been announced by the ancestors of the clan. If this is correct, then he should now be sharing company with

them. I won't therefore be wrong in concluding that the ancestors found him, perhaps, too good for us; he was found good enough for their company.

'This is my only consolation, otherwise I find it hard to believe that a young man, full of promise and married less than a year ago, should be killed when his aspirations and those of his clan had hardly been fulfilled; that he should be murdered to leave behind a young wife, now a widow, when her two grandparents are still alive and kicking. (*Echunjei began to sob and shake again and the CWF women began to comfort her.*) Yes, I have to console myself with the thought that Achamba is with our ancestors for our own good; else how can I believe that there are people, perhaps even right here now, directly or indirectly involved in Achamba's death. (*A long murmur in the crowd. Some people turned and looked furtively over their shoulders.*)

I say this because there is a Dudum saying that when the house gives you away, the world takes. Maybe the house has given Achamba away; maybe there are people here in Dudum who know something about Achamba's death. If this is the case, I join my in-law to invoke Achamba's ghost and blood to pursue them, to give them no rest.' Akaya ended, and again there was solemn silence.

Echunjei the widow was called upon to say a word. Still dressed in black with a light veil thrown over her black hat, she managed to mop her eyes, and braved the exercise, against tears and sobs. Having glanced at the enlarged, framed photograph of her spouse, she began:

'I'd like to thank all of you, friends, relatives, well-wishers and sympathisers who have come to help bury my husband ... What my father has said about him is true. He was a wonderful, caring and sensitive husband. And when he left Mbambe for Dudum, he was quite well. Something in me told me that journey might be a bad one. But I didn't have any good reason to give him not to make the trip. I should have known better; I should have believed more in my blood and stopped him from coming home. I didn't know it would be his ... his ... last. So my husband was ... was coming to be mur...murdered. Here... here is a.. a.. me.message I found in his shirt. But I .. I .. I .. can't read it. (*She gave the poem to Neba not far from her. Still biting her lips and fighting tears and sobs, she concluded*): I leave the murderers of my husband in the hands of the Almighty God. D,

adieu, adieu.’ And then heaving rapidly, she broke into tears, and many in the crowd wept with her.

But when the weeping had simmered down, it was Neba’s turn to deliver his eulogy. And he began thus: ‘The late Achamba had been my friend since the high school and the university. He was a kind and generous man, and a great friend. But if there was something that struck me about him, it was the great concern he had for his people, for Dudum. Many were the discussions we had concerning Dudum and its problems. I’m a native of Bafut, but I have come to know so much about Dudum politics and problems, thanks to my conversations with Achamba. Inspired by Achamba’s love for his people, I’ve myself become more interested in the welfare of my own Bafut people. Dudum has lost in Achamba an exceptional son, dedicated and committed to the unity and well-being of his people. If, as a previous speaker has said, it is the house that has given Achamba away for the world to take, then that house has just deprived itself of a rare son that will be difficult to replace. And it is a shame, indeed, for we don’t know what great things the late Achamba, as President of the DCDA, would have done for his people. He was still growing and developing and, I believe, God had not finished with him yet when he met his untimely death. A brilliant icon and beacon, a star has faded from Dudum sky.

‘The late Achamba was a very sensitive man as his wife has said, indeed, so sensitive that he had somehow sensed the coming of his own death. This is contained in the message Madam just spoke of a while ago. Listen to it as I read it; it is a poem.’

Neba then read the entire poem entitled ‘Elemental Fury,’ twice. And those who grasped its sense shook their heads. He paused for some time, time enough for some to savour the effect of the poem on their sensibilities. Then he continued:

‘You can see that in this poem, addressed to his wife, Achamba was talking of the terrible night that preceded his death, the night of storm, rain and lightning of which Chief Akaya spoke, the ominous night that all of Dudum experienced. You can see that in this poem he is talking of wild and dangerous elements, evil and destructive forces that eventually murdered him the following night.

‘How close can a man come to predicting his own death? Achamba was so sensitive a poet that he had, however vaguely and

obliquely, foreseen his own death. 'That's why he was invoking protection by his ancestors. Dudum, you have lost a man, and I've lost a bosom friend. Adieu bo Achamba, adieu!' he concluded. The crowd stirred briefly as people shook their heads sadly, some sighing, some wiping tears away and others stifling a cough. The leader of the Dudum Students' Union, one of whose patrons Achamba was, was called upon to pay his tribute to the deceased. He began in these words:

'Dear Patron, we had much to tell you in our forthcoming meeting. Had you lived a few months longer, you would have heard it. But since you're no longer with us physically, this is our brief message to you. You've been killed, but your ideas haven't been killed. We'll continue to promote the ideals you defended all your life: truth, justice, fairness, unity and hard work. Whoever thinks by killing you he has destroyed your ideas will be deceiving himself. He will have to eliminate all Dudum students to wipe out your ideas.

'Your death will only serve to make your ideas grow faster among us. Your rotting in the ground will only serve to make your ideas grow faster on Dudum soil. We assure you we'll turn your death into a new life for Dudum. Dudum will never be the same after you. In that way you will not have died in vain.'

After this other eulogies were delivered by the representative of the Dudum elite, an executive member of the DCDA, Chief Umeitoh, and the Principal of GHS Mbambe. The last funeral speech was that of the pastor of the PC Mbambe, the Rev. Awatt. It took the form of a brief sermon.

Before he delivered it, however, the Pastor gave orders for the casket to be transferred to the edge of the grave already prepared for the occasion. This was behind Achamba's house. Eight teachers from GHS Mbambe, four on each side of the coffin, lifted it and began to move towards the grave, immediately followed by Echunjei, now weeping. The crowd drifted in the direction of the grave, invading the immediate surroundings and trampling down plants, crops and the grass in the backyard.

When the wailing had cooled down, the Pastor began thus: 'Peace to you from Him who was, who is, and who is to come. (*The crowd answered, Amen.*) Dear people of God, our brief meditation on this sad occasion, will be on the theme 'Invest in the Lord, for it may be

too late.' Let me begin by first telling you a little story about death, the thing that has summoned us here. It is entitled 'The Origin of Blind and Merciless Death'.

'In the beginning whenever Death wanted to take away somebody's life, he sent out his servant to go and warn the person, just before he or she was to die. With time people soon understood that the servant of Death was a terrible person. They developed their own strategy to counter this deadly visitor.

'One day his master sent him to go and bring him a certain young man who had just got married. But the gentleman pleaded with the deadly visitor: "Please let me enjoy a few years with my bride. How can you take me away when I've hardly finished the wedding celebration?"

"The messenger of Death went away. His master sent him next to a father of many children. The man too complained to Death's agent thus: "If you take me now, my whole family will be gone. I beg you to kindly allow me a few more years to educate my children and give them a sense of direction." The envoy of Death took pity on him and went back to report to his master.

"The latter sent him out again, this time to a 17-year-old girl. She too pleaded with him to allow her to enjoy her life which was just getting to be very sweet. "Look at me," she said. "Look at my breasts, hair, beautiful legs and wonderful face. Men and boys are just dying for me. Please give me a few more years to enjoy my life. I beg you. After that you can come for me."

"The messenger of Death left and went back to his master, now very angry. He got the servant and plucked out his eyes. Henceforth each time the master wanted to take away somebody's life, he sent out the blind servant who carried out his duty without mercy because he could not see whom he was snatching away. Therefore, whenever the blind messenger of Death lands on anyone: whether it is a man, woman, boy, girl, or child, that person goes.

"This means that at any time any of us can be snatched away. But as people of God, as followers of Christ, are we ready when the time comes for us to go? Have we invested in the Lord, to ensure the safety of our souls?

"When we die physically our bodies remain here on earth. They return to the dust from where they came. What we have in that

coffin is no longer the Achamba we knew. It is pure earth about to return to its dust origin. The real Achamba has already deserted the body; the real Achamba is what we call the soul.

If Achamba's soul were to fly back into the body in the coffin there, the body will rise up and start talking, walking and behaving like the Achamba that we knew. Why? Because the essence of Achamba is back. Because the soul is the most essential part of the human being.

In fact so important is the soul compared to the body that if I, Pastor Awatt, were to die now my body would just be as useless as Achamba's is there. And if in trying to re-enter my body, my soul entered but Achamba's body, which person do you think we would have alive today? I'd like to believe that it would be Pastor Awatt. Awatt's soul would be in Achamba's body. I'd like to believe that the soul of Awatt would take command of Achamba's body.

That's right. We would have a person who, physically, is Achamba, but who speaks, walks and behaves like Awatt. We would have in the person who physically is Achamba not a high school teacher, but a pastor, a servant of God.

This hypothetical example is just to establish the fact that the soul is superior to the body. The soul is what leaves the body after death. Or when the soul is no longer there, we cannot talk of life. The soul is the only thing which returns to its Creator after physical death.

Are we ready to face our Creator when our time comes to be snatched away by the blind servant of Death? Have we prepared our souls to face our Creator when our end comes? Invest, therefore, in the Lord, dear people of God. Invest in spiritual things instead of material ones.

To invest in the Lord we have to emulate Christ's example, to lead the lives of genuine followers of Christ, to be dedicated to the promotion of God's work on earth. This means that we should honour our Christian obligations to our church, our family, our community, and our neighbour. We should not only talk of peace, love, justice and patience; we should be seen to be practising these virtues.

Unless we do this our Christianity will only be an empty vessel, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Unless we do this we will

be banking but on things of this world. Oh yes, unless we follow the example of our Lord we will only be banking on things of the flesh that will return to dust, to the neglect of our soul which will return to our Creator. And our Creator, the Almighty God, will accept only the souls of those who, while on earth, had invested in Him. The rest He will consign to hell.

‘Are we ready when the time shall come for us to face our Creator? Have we prepared our souls so that they can be accepted by Him? Or are we preparing ourselves only to face hell fire forever?’

‘Dear people of God, if blind Death were to snatch you today, now, as it has done to Achamba, would you be confident that you have invested in the Lord? That’s right. Would you be proud that your soul will be saved? Are you ready when your time shall come? Think of Achamba’s body, and change your ways. Amen’ The crowd responded ‘Amen.’

The man of God ended his sermon and asked the CWF group to give a series of choruses for the population to sing. They sang three rollicking choruses, bearing on aspects of the theme of the sermon:

- (1) *Are you ready?*
 Are you ready?
 Are you ready
 When the Lord shall come?
 Are you?
 Are you ready?
 Are you?
 Are you ready?
 Are you?
 Are you ready
 When the Lord shall come?
 Dear sisters
 Are you ready
 When the Lord shall come?
 Dear brothers
 Are you ready
 When the Lord shall come?

- (2) *Earthly things deceive us
Do you know that
Earthly things deceive us?
Do you know that?
Worldly things deceive us
Do you know that
Worldly things deceive us?
Do you know that?*
- (3) *We are passing, passing
We are passing in this world o
We are passing, passing
Oh God bless us
We are passing in this world
We are passing
We are passing, passing
We are passing in this world o
We are passing, passing
Oh God bless us
We are passing in this world, etc.*

After that the Pastor prayed for the safety of Achamba's soul, calling on the Lord to receive him and forgive him whatever sins he might have committed while on earth. Then he asked the crowd to join him in saying the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father who art in Heaven ...' At the end he made the benediction and then ordered the coffin to be lowered.

Four young men jumped into the grave to receive it. And then there arose renewed weeping as Achamba's remains were being lowered into the bosom of the earth. The grave-diggers began to fill up the grave with the earth, while the four young men inside were trampling the ground with their feet.

In their last friendly gesture to the departed, one by one, the mourners came round, scooped earth with one hand and dropped it into the grave. When the grave had been completely filled and the ground on it well-trampled, there came a volley of gun firing from those with guns: 'Doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! doom! doom! dudum! dudum! dudum! doom! doom! etc.'

The report lasted for about ten minutes with some gun owners reloading and discharging their guns. On the whole the discharge consisted of about fifty gunshots, a befitting gun salute, indeed, in honour of an exceptional son of the soil. For the time being the grave was dressed with a line of stones encircling it, a wooden cross bearing Achamba's dates of birth and death, and the wreaths and flowers brought by mourners.

Formal burial rites being over, the mourners then began the celebration with a collation followed by dancing. All the food prepared for the occasion was brought and shared out to participants. Visitors were served according to their groups, and residents of Dudum according to their villages or quarters. Drinks were distributed in the same manner.

There was beer, raffia wine, red wine and hot drinks enough for everybody to drink to their fill. And most people preferred beer, for there was too much of it. Indeed in the history of Dudum there had never been any beer consumed on any single occasion in the clan like the beer available in Embuta's compound on that day. In common parlance beer had become water, with which people could even wash their hands, on the day of Achamba's burial.

People drank beer and more beer. People vomited out beer to make room for more beer. But beer continued to flow. Some people combined the beer with red wine, raffia wine and spirits, and became dead drunk.

As the feasting was going on, the generator man was playing over the loud speaker, gospel music from audio-cassettes. This went on for quite some time until it was time for dancing. The audio-cassette music then gave way to the *Akara*, a popular local dance enjoyed by all: men, women, boys, girls and children.

The dancers, mostly Dudum inhabitants, formed a huge arena in the great courtyard, with the visitors as spectators. In the centre of the arena were the musicians who, with the help of drums, rattles, skin-drums, bugles and gongs, produced intoxicating tunes that sent dancers wild with dancing. They swayed from left to right as they moved forward in a circle. Occasionally two or three dancers would tear themselves loose from the line and dance uniformly to the centre of the arena and back to their position in the line. From time to time owners of guns fired them above the heads of the dancers.

As evening drew near most visitors began to return to town. They bade goodbye to Echunjei, and took off in their various vehicles. And by the time darkness settled on Dudum, the caravan from town had completely left the clan. But the Principal of GHS, Neba, Echunjei, the CWF women, the generator boy and the Pastor remained to spend the night in Akan.

Meanwhile the Dudum residents continued dancing, eating, drinking and firing guns, throughout the night. Echunjei and six women slept in Achamba's room, while the others slept in his brothers' rooms. As for Neba, the Pastor, and the Principal, they spent the night in the parlour, while many other natives slept on the parlour floor, now strewn with plantain leaves.

Occasionally Echunjei would be awakened from sleep by the noise of dancing, drumming and singing outside. She would sob for some time and then fall back to sleep, unnoticed by the CWF women who, from pure exhaustion, slept very deeply. Now and then Neba would also be awakened to the reality of the situation. He would listen to the sounds, dancing and singing from outside, and then the prophetic poem would come back to his mind.

Obviously the sounds he now heard were not the raging sounds his friend had captured in the poem. But there was something about the present context that made him tremble with fear. Here he was in the same house in which his friend had spent his last night, listening to sounds not quite different from those that had inspired Achamba's lyric.

Were those his own last sounds? Was that his own last night too? Would he eventually return safely to Bamenda as his friend had not? Neba was a bit scared. Thank God the light in the parlour was permanently on.

He yearned for dawn to come faster. The anxiety about his own safety drove sleep away from his eyes until around 5 a.m. when, exhausted as he was, but against his wish, he fell asleep. His sleep was, however, light, for his head was continuously drumming with the sounds from without.

The celebration ended in the morning. The dancers, many of them exhausted, sleepy, hoarse and with heavy legs, trudged home. After taking breakfast, Echunjei, Neba, the Principal, the Pastor, the CWF women and the generator man took off for Mbambe. They

drove in two vehicles, and did so quietly until they got to Anjong school. As they passed the Anjong School Hall, Echunjei's bust began to heave and then she started weeping. The woman closest to her said 'Ashia sister, wey ashia.'

It occurred to a CWF woman that near the very spot the day before Echunjei, who had been relatively calm, had suddenly burst into tears. She wondered whether it was a mere coincidence or not. But unknown to the women Echunjei harboured very tender memories of the Anjong School Hall with its immediate sentimental surroundings.

The hall marked the beginning of her serious relationship with Achamba. In her student days he and she had met and conversed in that hall several times. The unforgettable boulders in front of the hall reminded her of those tender romantic moments he and she spent together in the moonlight on those stones; they reminded her of the tender caresses and sweet declarations from him; they reminded her of the glorious moments when they danced to the admiration of many a student; they reminded her of the wonderful speeches delivered by her husband when he addressed the Dudum students, teachers and parents.

The memorable boulders were the key to the memory lane, discharging, from the dark recesses of her mind, those nostalgic feelings that came swirling and surging forward on to her consciousness. Those bitter sweet memories were too powerful to be bottled up in her. They had to find an outlet somehow. No wonder then that they came bursting out in irresistible tears.

Yes, Echunjei wept when she set eyes again on that nostalgic scene. But it was not idle weeping. She was weeping for something real. She was weeping for what had been and never would be again. She was weeping for a glorious gleam that had vanished from her life and also from the face of the earth. She was weeping for a past glory gone with her husband.

Following Achamba's death, the Divisional Chief of National Security in Mbambe, sent a team of three policemen from his service to Dudum to carry out an investigation concerning the brutal

assassination. The 'boys' made two trips to Dudum to contact key family members of the deceased and possible suspects. Twice they visited Echunjei.

But from their air of insouciance, as they made inquiries about the murder, Echunjei wondered if anything useful would come out of their effort. She had little faith in the police, anyway. The culprits, whoever they were, were yet to be tracked down and brought to face the law, if at all. Thus, by the time she gave birth to her child, the police probe had yielded nothing yet ...

When she became pregnant Echunjei had wished, like many mothers, that her first child be a girl. But with the death of her husband, the desire changed from one for a girl to that for a boy. She longed for her husband's alter ego, a male child, a son she would look up to as the closest person to the real man, her husband.

Thereafter she prayed constantly and fervently that the child she was carrying be a boy. And her wish was granted. Three months after Achamba's death, Echunjei gave birth to a healthy baby boy. The happy news was joyfully received by family relations and genuine friends and well-wishers.

Elated at the news, Embuta defied the heavy rains and bad road and boarded a Land rover from Akan to Mbambe to see his long-awaited grandson. A few days later Chief Akaya, accompanied by three brothers of his, followed suit. True, three months were not three years for a wound to heal. But it was a reasonable length of time for the painful effect of Achamba's death on his relatives in general and Echunjei in particular to soften appreciably. By the time she gave birth to her son, Echunjei's emotional wounds, though not completely gone, were gradually healing. So when her father, uncles and father-in-law came to see the new born child, she was fairly emotionally stable.

On the day that the dressed end of the child's umbilical cord had healed, Embuta tied the fallen knot of flesh in a rag to be buried among the plantain suckers behind his house at home, to ensure the baby's link with his ancestors, and the stability of his soul. Embuta placed the knotted rag right at the bottom of his raffia bag.

Then he performed the birth ceremony, the *Ubu*, with Akaya and his brothers, presenting the in-laws with a goat. Although in

actual fact a pig, it was traditionally referred to, on such occasions, as a goat. Then he slaughtered them a cock, presented them a jug of raffia wine and FCFA 5.000 each. A bag of salt to be distributed to the women at home was given. Five kola-nuts were part of the ritual. The testes of the slaughtered cock were stainless and the broken kola-nuts were in favour of the ceremony.

The cooked cock was consumed while the goat was preserved for slaughtering back home. As the people drank and chatted happily, the rest of the rite was tackled.

‘What name have you given your grandson, Embuta?’ Akaya asked after sipping his wine. Embuta beamed at his daughter-in-law.

‘Well, my daughter-in-law and I have given him the name *Uyaka*,’ replied Embuta.

‘I see. A suggestive name indeed. *Uyaka*. A very suggestive name. Can you explain it?’ Akaya teased him.

‘Of course,’ answered Embuta. ‘You yourself know what it means in Dudum language. I’ll test you. Interpret it.’

‘Well, let me make an attempt,’ replied Akaya. ‘It has two meanings: one meaning is ‘Thank you,’ and the other is ‘Welcome.’ So which one applies to your grandson?’

‘Both,’ replied Embuta.

‘I’d like you to be explicit,’ said Akaya.

‘Fine,’ answered Embuta. ‘Traditionally,’ he went on, ‘because this child was born after the death of his father, he is automatically named after him. His full name is *Uyaka* Achamba, which means, in one sense, Thank you Achamba, and in another, Welcome Achamba.’

‘That’s right, very suggestive, indeed,’ said Akaya. ‘The moment you uttered the word *Uyaka* I started figuring out its rich suggestions in the circumstances. Thank you Achamba and Welcome Achamba. Very meaningful indeed. How did you two come by *Uyaka*?’ he asked, looking at his daughter.

‘Well, I suggested to my father-in-law,’ replied Echunjei, ‘that we name the baby *Uyaka* because the word conveys my gratitude to God for answering my prayer for a son. *Uyaka* is really to thank God for granting my request. On the other hand it is also to welcome Achamba back to life. Yes, what the Lord took away with the left

hand, He has given back with the right. In a way my husband has come back.'

'Thank you for your answer,' Chief Akaya replied. 'It makes my heart sweet. It ties in well with what I said in my funeral oration. The whole thing is linked to our ancestors and their influence on our lives. The birth of this child at this time and its meaningful name fit well with our traditional belief.'

'Achamba has gone and joined the company of the venerable dead. And thanks to his intercession, the revered ancestors have answered our supplication. That's why we say Thank You Achamba or *Uyaka* Achamba, for what he has influenced the ancestors, with Nyuikoh's blessing, to do to us.'

'On the other hand Welcome Achamba means that Achamba has not only interceded with our departed fathers to help us. He has been ordered by them to come back to us in a new way, in the form of a child, a son. In other words, Achamba has been born again, reincarnated. You can see how, though small as the baby is, he resembles the father in his lips, ears and nose. That is why we say to the baby Achamba *Uyaka* Achamba, welcome Achamba. Does my interpretation make sense?'

'A great deal of sense,' replied Embuta. 'That was my own reasoning too, although I was inspired by my daughter-in-law, the young *Abu*.'

'Well, I think you're giving me too much credit for the double meaning of the name,' remonstrated Echunjei. 'When I thought of *Uyaka* I did so in the Christian rather than in the traditional sense. I meant to thank God for being kind to me, by giving back my husband to me.'

'I still believe you deserve some credit there,' said Embuta. 'As a woman of the church your interpretation is good; as a man of the world, your father's is good too. I thank my ancestors for what they have done to me. I'm glad I'm alive to see this particular grandson.'

'Not that he is my first grandson. No. I have many from my daughters' line. But none of them is fit to inherit my property since ours is a patrilineal society. A woman's urine can never rise above the fence. My rightful heirs can come only from the line of my sons. If I were to die now, I wouldn't regret it. My own eyes have seen my grandson.'

When Embuta had finished talking, one of Akaya's brothers ordered Echunjei to come forward and kneel down before him with the child in her arms. Then he rose up with his cup full of wine to conclude the rite in an incantation. Each ancestor's name invoked was accompanied by a generous shower of wine from his mouth onto mother and child:

'We have eaten the *Ubu* well.

We now put your hearts into you.' (*The other brothers and Embuta responded: Amenieé, so be it*).

'Let no bad dream visit you.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'Let no evil man ever pass near you.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'If you kick your toe against a stone, let the stone break.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'May you two live long.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'May you two have good health.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'We say so in the name of Ngiekum, prrrffff.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'We say so in the name of Ambikoh, prrrffff.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'We say so in the name of Abendong, prrrffff.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'We say so in the name of Anjaanoh, prrrffff.'

'*Amenieé!*'

'We say so in the name of Umenei, prrrffff.'

'*Amenieé!*'

After this he handed the remaining wine in his cup to Echunjei to drink. The next day Echunjei's father and uncles returned home with their goat and the bag of salt for the family women. But Embuta stayed back for a week, during which time he and Echunjei discussed many family issues

If a radiance had faded away from Echunjei's life, it had been replaced by a new splendour. If she treasured the present gleam in its own right, she even valued it more for its link with the past glory. If the future of the present gleam was the hope of a new

dream, it was also the secret of her new strength. Echunjei needed this sustenance and psychic energy to be able to combat the numerous problems and imponderables given rise to by her husband's death.

Her heart's desire was now for her only son to grow up healthy and strong, to be endowed by the Almighty God with the right brains to undertake the type of rigorous education she planned for him. Yes, so long as she was alive, she would save every penny to give her son an enviable education. He would read the best books that money could buy, and attend the best university within her means.

What her first husband was, her second would be, too; what Achamba was, her son would be, too. But what the former could not be, the latter would be! God should only give her son the appropriate brains for the grand educational plan she was designing for him, if only to keep afresh the memory of her beloved husband. *Uyaka* Achamba!

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Five years had passed since Achamba died; five years during which period no conclusive evidence had been established concerning his murderers. But in the sixth year of his death an event took place in the North-West provincial capital of Bamenda that was to unravel the mystery surrounding Achamba's death. It was an incident which, but for the fact that it involved two sons of Dudum, would have gone unnoticed in that clan.

The episode involved an exchange of gunfire between law-enforcement officers and men of the underworld in Bamenda. Following a tip-off from one of the inhabitants of Mulang Quarter, the head of the Urban Police and his seven armed men raided the hide-out of a gang of thirteen, a group that had recently been unleashing acts of terrorism on the peace-loving population of the provincial metropolis.

At the end of the scuffle, there were five dead and four critically wounded on the side of the thieves, and one dead and two seriously injured on that of the police. Two Dudum elements were members of the gang. One was killed, and the other critically wounded. It was the latter who, during the police interrogation that took place after the fight, threw light on the enigma enshrouding Achamba's murder.

The surviving gang members, confessing their crimes into microphones connected to tape-recorders, made outrageous revelations regarding the number of armed robberies they had carried out; they talked of how many people were killed in the process, the nature and value of their booty; they disclosed the names of other gang members and their whereabouts.

Their loot included items like radio sets, radio-cassettes, record-players, precious china-ware, durable kitchen utensils, expensive furniture, and two taxis for their operation. Money discovered in their hide-out amounted to well over FCFA 17.000.000. Also found in their keeping were little bags stuffed with marijuana.

Their arms included ten locally fashioned pistols, machetes, specially designed iron bars to pry open doors and windows, and two heavy hammers. The various items, with the surviving armed robbers lined up behind them, were displayed to the curious Bamenda public. An endless stream of city dwellers jammed the police station to feast their eyes on the dangerous gang that, for five months, at least, had subjected them to a terrible baptism of fear, fright and terror.

The thieves confessed to having consciously or unconsciously caused the death of some seven people in the last ten years. The critically wounded Dudum element, a backsliding Christian who last went to church nine years ago, made a confession that was to shake Dudum. Sensing that he would not long survive the wounds sustained from the gunshots in the unlikely eventuality that he was not executed through a firing squad; wishing to clear his conscience and beg for forgiveness from those offended; and anxious about the fate of his soul after his very imminent death, he decided to reconcile himself to his destiny, to withhold nothing and release everything, in the hope of finding final peace with God. And one of the revelations he made was that he and his accomplice had murdered Lucas A. Achamba, five years ago.

They had secretly gone home to stow away, far from the boisterous urban centre, within the quiet precincts of the village, some of their most valuable loot, in the expectation that a more prosperous customer would show up for the goods. On the eve of the murder Abaago, who was aware of their presence in the village, had secretly contacted them and proposed the diabolic deal. The price for accomplishing it was FCFA 30.000, with FCFA 15.000 collected in advance, and the remaining FCFA 15.000 to be completed after the act.

But, as it turned out, they were so scared by the alarm raised by the network of thundering and echoing drum messages following the assassination that they fled Dudum in the dark and never had the nerves to go back to Abaago for the remaining amount. To avoid being seen they took but the less-frequented footpath from Ajei to Tinako'o, occasionally dodging into the bush, but keeping close to the track until they got to the motorable road. From there it was easy to get to Acha Tugi where they safely boarded a Land rover to Bamenda, undiscovered.

Dudum elements in Bamenda were scandalised by this public confession. By orchestrating the atrocity Abaago had revealed himself as the devil incarnate. A man capable of such a horrendous deed did not himself deserve to live among civilised human beings. Abaago would have to pay for this crime in one way or the other.

Shocking as Abaago's role in Achamba's death was, it did not, however, take many Dudum people at home by surprise. For those versed with Dudum - village politics it was possible that Abaago, who had considered Achamba a nuisance in the way of Akan's rise to socio-political prominence in the clan, could have hired men of the underworld to eliminate him. As far as the development of Akan and Dudum was concerned, the ideological differences between Abaago and Achamba were well-known.

Abaago saw Akan as the potential political capital of the clan and nothing less. Anyone who dared to dispute that fact, as Achamba did, was Abaago's number one enemy. And when that enemy was a rising Achamba with prospects of wielding greater socio-political power in Dudum to the possible detriment of Akan, given his ideological position, Abaago saw in him a formidable adversary to be crushed if Akan had to succeed.

No wonder, prior to Achamba's death, Abaago had tried unsuccessfully to set the Akan youth against the high school teacher. But his failure to rally the youth behind his cause only intensified his hatred and fear of Achamba. And the chance presence of two outlaws at home at the time was but a happy coincidence that played into his hands. The murderers thus met Abaago in the right frame of mind for the deadly deal. He seized the opportunity with both hands and committed the atrocity that threw Dudum into darkness.

Five months following Achamba's death, his maternal uncles from Ajei, in an effort to find out the cause of his death as demanded by tradition, decided to exploit all possible avenues available to them: necromancy, the Obasinjong, and the Squirrel. They set out for the border village of Mengom to consult the famous medium, Angweretong.

When they arrived in the man's compound, they presented to the medium's attendants their consultation fee consisting of a cock, a calabash of wine, a goat and FCFA 5.000. They were then led to a shrine, a structure built out of mud, sticks and bamboos, and roofed with thatch. The interior of the building was a reflection or a simulation of forest features. There were stunted, green plants growing in the hut with lichens and moss on their trunks, and a little bush of closely packed *nkeng* plants at the base of which was a pond of fresh, crystal clear, bubbling water. Indeed the pond looked more like a little lake, for water was neither coming in nor going out.

The edge of the little lake was demarcated by a circular mound of earth beaten smooth. The place looked damp and ugly, with something like blood sprinkled, and eggs smashed, along the margin of the pond. Beside the *nkeng* plants was a pot of burning barks of trees emitting an irritating smell, and a spiral of smoke into the air. Occasionally frogs croaked from the edge of the lake or from the mini mossy undergrowth.

Near the pot was a chair or rather something resembling a throne, obviously for the necromancer. The chair was on a slight, inclined plain and below, opposite it, were stools hewn out of tree-trunks on which his clients would sit. The five men from Ajei sat on them to await the arrival of the medium. The latter soon arrived, arrayed in a manner befitting his socio-cultural status.

On his head was something like a crown decorated with feathers of assorted colours; on his arms were tied little, leather bands, with tiny bags of amulets attached to them. His body was bare but spotted with white-wash. Hanging down his left flank was a monkey skin, and around his waist a skirt of smoked, brown fibres. The necromancer sat on his throne in front of which was a wooden bowl of cowries.

In this weird shrine with calabashes, feathers, human and animal skulls hanging from the low ceiling, the five Ajei men sat, mute, awed and expectant. The séance started when the medium removed five cowries from the bowl and cast them on the floor:

'Utagah, Ugwendum, Ajeaga, Esotie and Akwago, you're welcome to my house,' were his first words.

'How did you know our names?' was the spontaneous reaction of nearly all the Ajei men.

'It is my job to know the names of my clients, and to solve the problems they bring to me. So what's your problem?'

'We have come to find out from our nephew who his killers were, and the real cause of his death,' replied Utagah.

The medium then scooped a handful of cowries from the bowl and threw them on the floor, and after a long reflection he said:

'It is as clear as day light. Look at them. Two people. Look at how they have cut him down. But there is a powerful third person in the background. He is not directly involved in the act but very instrumental to it. Look at them there on the floor; it is as clear as day light. Oh man, how cruel you are! God made his world, but man has ruined it. Utagah, can you see them?' the medium asked.

'We see nobody, my lord; we can see only the cowries,' answered Utagah.

'Don't you see how the cowries are sitting?' pursued Angweretong.

'Of course we do, my lord, but we cannot interpret their positioning. We have come to find out from you who the killers of our nephew are,' replied Utagah.

'It is not for me to tell you; your murdered nephew will speak himself. I see his killers quite all right, but it is he who will reveal his assassins in his own voice. My motto is: Bring me your fee, and I invoke your dead to talk to you.'

A wave of hope went through the clients; they were very impressed by the medium's performance so far. The man seemed to be omniscient, for he had even called them by their names. The necromancer then went and brought a black, clay pot from behind the cluster of *nkeng* plants and stood it in front of the men. The mouldy-looking pot, with strands of cobwebs about it, was covered with a piece of flat rock.

The medium then seized a bell which he rang several times, interspersed with incantations. And the incantations, a combination of harsh consonants with vowels, were pure abracadabra in the ears of the visitors. The man rose and pulled out a little broom from the low ceiling; he went and dipped it into the little lake and then swung it to the left and then to the right. Showers from it fell onto the floor. Then he listened intently, obviously to a secret communication, seized the bell once more and rang it a few more

times; he tilted his ear in one direction, and then in the opposite one, before straightening himself up.

‘Everything is almost ready,’ he announced. ‘We will soon proceed with business. Utagah, are you people ready?’

‘We’re waiting for your instruction, my lord; you own the yam and the knife. We’re waiting for your word,’ was all Utagah said.

‘Good, you’ll soon hear your nephew. I’ve successfully brought him from the far away country beyond us, from the land of the dead. He is near and here.’

The séance proper was about to begin. The medium lifted the flat rock covering the black, clay pot, seized something like a straw, about the length of half a foot, and stirred the contents of the pot. And from it was released, at intervals of six or seven seconds, a certain substance like steam that went up but soon disappeared into thin air. All of this lasted for over five minutes.

Then from the little lake came liquid, lapping sounds, a sign that something organic was stirring the pool of water that, until then, had remained relatively still. Then the lapping sounds from the lake ceased, and the black pot took over; the liquid sounds could be clearly heard to be coming from the clay pot.

‘Everything is now set,’ declared the medium. ‘Whoever is ready to address your dead nephew should step forward and stand in front of that pot. But be brief because your nephew is given only a short time to be here. Call his name, tell him yours, and then ask him your questions and wait for his answers.’

Utagah stepped forward as ordered and began thus: ‘Achamba, it’s me, Utagah, your maternal Uncle, son of Ejanwie. We have come to find out from you the cause of your death. Were you killed because of a woman, because of money, because of book, or because of politics? Who were your killers and where are they now? Where are you yourself now? Answer me, Achamba, son of Embuta.’

From the pot came a mixture of a hissing and a whistling sound, a kind of disembodied utterance, a far cry from the flesh-and-blood sound they expected to be the distinctive voice of Achamba as they had known it. The visitors were all standing up now and straining their ears to pick up the information. When the sound stopped, Utagah complained that they did not quite get what it had said.

The priest asked him to repeat the process, and said that this time he (the medium) would listen and do the interpretation for them. Utagah did so. After listening to the whistling response, the medium made the following translation:

‘He says he was killed neither because of women, nor money, nor book, but because of politics. That his killers are in Bamenda Town, but their paymaster is in Dudum. He (Achamba) is with his ancestors, and they have forbidden him to release the names of his murderers and taken upon themselves the responsibility to avenge his death. So you should leave everything in their hands. But rest assured of one thing, that vengeance will come soon,’ concluded the medium.

He then cast a handful of cowries on the floor, and after studying them for a while, told his clients that the séance had ended and that the spirit of their nephew had gone back to the world of the dead.

The five Ajei men took off for the return trip home, satisfied that Achamba’s death would soon be avenged. When they got home, they did not tarry long in Ajei but proceeded to Akan to report on their findings to Embuta who had earlier been joined by Chief Akaya to await the arrival of the uncles from Mengom.

‘Welcome,’ greeted Embuta as he showed them where to sit. The men first paid the usual traditional tribute to Chief Akaya before sitting down. They were entertained with food and wine. And when they had finished eating and were now drinking the raffia wine, Embuta then asked the obvious question.

‘So how was your journey?’

‘Our journey was fruitful,’ replied Utagah. ‘But Embuta, the world is bad. You hear me? I say the world is bad.’ He stopped for a while to sip his wine while Embuta and Chief Akaya were eager to hear his definite message. Without much ado, he went straight to it.

‘When the house gives, the world takes. The killers of our nephew are in Bamenda Town, but the main brain behind the act is here at home.’

‘And who are they?’ asked Chief Akaya.

‘Our nephew refused to release their names because, as the medium who translated the message to us told us, the ancestors with whom Achamba lives, have forbidden him to release their names. They have taken the full responsibility to carry out vengeance

on Achamba's behalf. He said the real killers are in Bamenda, but their master is here at home. He advised us to leave everything in the hands of the forefathers, for retribution will not be long coming. Before long something terrible will happen to the three villains.'

'What was their motive?' pursued Chief Akaya.

'The cause of his death is politics. Achamba was killed because of politics.'

'Aha, I said it!' was Embuta's first reaction since Utagah started talking. 'I knew that this village politics would be my undoing. I had warned my son against getting too involved in Akan and Dudum problems.'

'But do not worry,' Embuta, justice will run its course. Achamba's killers will pay for their crime,' Esotie intervened. 'However, I think that now that we know the cause of our nephew's death, we can make a reasonable guess of who the man behind his death is. We know the key politicians in Dudum. Let us ask them to each give us a live squirrel if they are innocent; let Abaago, Ubeno, and Umeitoh prove to us that they had no hand in Achamba's death by giving us a live squirrel. If we are not satisfied, we can even proceed to Mamfe Oversight for the Obasinjong,' Esotie ended.

'I think this is not necessary,' Chief Akaya said. 'You people have just said that Achamba's spirit advised you to leave things in the hands of the ancestors. That is a great responsibility. I'm confident that it will be carried out. Let us not intrude in the affairs of the forefathers. Leave them to fight the villains in their own way. We should not put ourselves between ancestral anger and the targeted criminals; we may be scorched by lightning directed at them. I have never doubted that Achamba was with our ancestors. Your message has only vindicated me.'

'I'd like to suggest that we should keep all that we have discussed here as a secret. Things may miscarry if the impending fate of the murderers becomes common talk. Let us remain quiet and watch the form of ancestral intervention on Achamba's behalf.'

They all heeded Chief Akaya's advice, and the mediumistic message from Mengom remained a well-kept secret among them. The tension that would have been generated by this information was thus averted. Consequently, suspects like Abaago, Ubeno, and Umeitoh who, otherwise might have been embarrassed, harassed or tormented, went about their daily activities apparently unperturbed.

The first anniversary of Achamba's murder passed and then the second and the third, but nothing happened. Then the fourth and the fifth passed, and still there was no ocular proof that the ancestors had reacted. Then, in the sixth year of Achamba's assassination, when any reaction from the living-dead was least expected, the ancestors struck out, and they struck out fatally.

The surviving Dudum criminal was suffering from massive haemorrhage, and it looked as if even the combined efforts of the doctors and nurses of the Bamenda General Hospital would not rescue him from the claws of death. And shortly after confessing his crimes and the part he played in Achamba's death, he gave up the ghost. But the Dudum elements in Bamenda refused to assume responsibility for the burial of the corpses of the two armed robbers who had killed a great son of the soil. The Bamenda Urban Council buried them, together with the other thieves, in a mass grave.

When the news of the confessions of the criminal reached Dudum, many people were outraged. They could not believe what they heard, that Abaago was the brain behind the murder! Most of those who had witnessed Achamba's memorable, funeral celebration were still alive, and so was Abaago. Though it had taken place six years ago, the ceremony was yet fresh in everyone's mind.

The immediate reaction of the villagers was to boycott Abaago's compound, and avoid any contact with him or any of his family relations. He and his family therefore became social outcasts. As a result Abaago began to limit his movement, as much as possible, to his compound, and was scarcely seen, not even at Chief Umeitoh's palace, his habitual haunt.

Within a short time Abaago had undergone an incredible physical transformation. His face, step, gait, and stooping look—all of these—bespoke a single expression: mental torture. Something seemed to have been eating him up internally, probably the scourge from the ancestors. He grew pale and gaunt, wearing the look of an apparition. Those very few children who chanced upon him took immediate flight. It was a ghost and not Abaago they saw, a man with a deadly touch, a spectre that had become a pariah.

Abaago became haunted by horrible thoughts, for he was well aware of the possible fate that awaited him. Recently, within the last three years, a strange social phenomenon had developed in Dudum; a certain spirit had seized the youths of the clan. Young people had taken to a bizarre practice of lynching adults suspected of having a hand in the untimely death of youngsters. Old men were accused of causing the death of youths through either witchcraft or *nyongo*. Rumours were rife that some individuals in Dudum belonged to diabolic societies which demanded the sacrifice of family members, mostly young people, in exchange for fabulous wealth.

The infamous practice was to get hold of the accused, tie their hands behind, spray them from head to toe with petrol, propel them into their houses already doused with the inflammable liquid, lock the doors before setting the structures and the suspects ablaze. Four men had since died through this infernal process, the latest being Atoroki of Akan.

His was the most gruesome of the four cases. When choked beyond endurance as he could no longer stand the infernal flames, Atoroki, whose hands were now free, the flames having burnt away the ropes with which they had been bound, did the only thing necessary for his survival. He frantically charged headlong against the wall of his mud-and-stick hut. With feet and fists he madly kicked and hammered at the wall which soon gave way. Then screaming and flaming, Atoroki crashed out of hell for fresh air. Still screaming he rolled himself many times in the dust until the flames went out.

He then lay groaning, partially blinded and terribly burnt, looking like a monster. His peeled body was an odious patch work of black and red skin smeared with dust. The enraged gang of youths ran to the spot where the moaning man lay, a safe distance from the collapsing, burning hut. They seized more faggots and bamboos and threw them on the suspected wizard in agony; poured more petrol on him, and then lighted a bamboo splinter and threw it onto the pile. A sudden, huge, bright flame rose up over Atoroki now screaming out his last ounce of energy. The man's screams eventually died down and then were not heard anymore, but he continued to burn until he was reduced to a charred mass.

This was one of the ghastly scenes that Abaago reviewed in his tormented mind. It soon became obvious that he would undergo something similar to Atoroki's fate, that he would receive his own baptism of fire. Rumour had it that the infamous youths were gearing up for an inevitable assault on Abaago's homestead, with the sole objective of roasting the man alive!

Abaago swore to himself that it would not happen, that he would not allow himself to be caught unawares. If he had to die, it would not be through fire. No, no way to die. If he had to die, it would be at his own hands. In his mind's eye Abaago looked back and beheld suffocation in a burning building; he looked ahead and saw a tree with a knotted rope. Abaago looked behind him and beheld the deadly devils with their lethal petrol and in front of him, a knotted rope hanging from a branch of a tree. Yes, in both directions Abaago saw death. He was between two inescapable dangers. But he would rather settle for the peril of his own making. Suicide would be the only way to die.

The day following this supreme decision by Abaago, when the wrathful youths went to burn him alive, they were led to a plum tree behind his house and shown Abaago hanging from a rope tied to a branch of the tree. The incensed youths felt cheated and disappointed, but could not do anything to a man who, by taking his own life, had committed a great abomination.

With the death of Abaago coming on the heels of that of the murderers, it did not take much reflection on the part of Chief Akaya to become convinced that the ancestors had carried out the long-awaited retribution; the chickens had come home to roost; justice had finally run its full course as nemesis had caught up with the murderers. Achamba's murder had been avenged. According to Chief Akaya this ancestral intervention in human affairs was a clear demonstration of the influence of the forefathers over mortal men, of the power of the living-dead over the living.

Chief Akaya and the others had thought that the ancestors would react soon after the assassination, that they were going to scorch Achamba's killers within a few months. But no. The forefathers had taken their time. Their concept of time was different from that of humans. It had taken them more than five long years to prevail upon the supreme Deity in the sky, Nyuikoh, to strike down the murderers of Achamba. Indeed the ways of the ancestors were not those of mortals.

At the end of his musings Chief Akaya wrote a letter to his widowed daughter, Echunjei, who had left Mbambe for the nation's capital, Yaoundé, five years ago. Three years later, as an external candidate, she had written and passed the GCE Advanced Level examination in two subjects: literature and history. She was now a student-teacher in the Higher Teachers' Training College, the faculty of education in the University of Yaoundé, specialised in training teachers for secondary schools. Her son, *Uyaka* Achamba, was in Nursery Two in an elitist, private primary school.

Echunjei was fortifying herself academically in order to improve her material and financial resources in preparation for the educational project of her son. Now a strong, healthy and handsome boy, *Uyaka* Achamba was doing very well in school to his mother's great joy. All that Echunjei did after reading her father's letter about retributive justice having been meted out to Abaago and his henchmen was to raise her hands and say, looking upwards, 'Oh Papa God, you know everything. May your will be done. *Uyaka*, Papa God.'

THE END

Son of the Native Soil is a work whose quiet maturity glows in both subject and style. Here, love heals but the force of hate is very real. The hero, Lucas Achamba, by charisma and love undertakes to unite Dudum clan which politicking and egotism have split. His quick success stirs bitter rivalry and heartless cruelty that decide his fate. Nature is jumpy and even hysterical at this, and Ambanasom exposes it with fine evocative mastery. The style is refined and honeyed by sonal devices and visual tropes that half conceal subtle slashes at human foibles.

"... Ambanasom offers a myriad of perspectives which hinge on classical issues of universal resonance such as man's inhumanity to man, living in fame by dying for virtue's cause, retributive justice, individual versus collective will..."

**Edward A. Ayugho, National Vice-President,
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"A moving allegory... on people across the globe whose history has been beset by problems."

Kenneth Usongo, Lecturer and Critic, Houston Texas, U.S.A

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